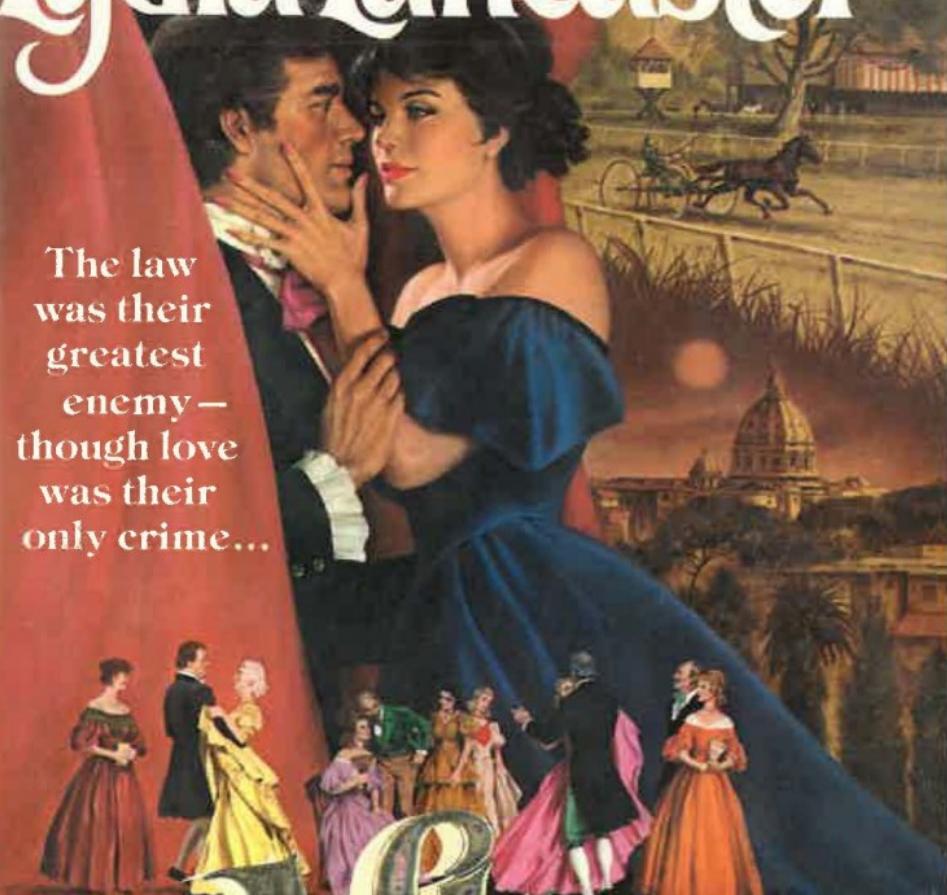


Lydia Lancaster

The law
was their
greatest
enemy—
though love
was their
only crime...



After Tomorrow

Love's First Challenge

"I'll show you who's a little girl!" Contrition said, blinded as much by fury as by the water in her eyes. Deliberately, because she was determined to get through that thick, supercilious skin of his, Contrition kissed him again, pressing the entire length of her body against his as she held him fast with her strong young arms. Damn him, she'd show him if it was the last thing she ever did!

For a moment, Henry was so shaken that he almost lost control of himself. There was nothing that he wanted more than to go on kissing this maddening girl until the sun came up. He was shaken to his core, the pain of wanting her was so acute that he groaned as he crushed her to him. Her mouth was warm and sweet, opening under his, her breasts were crushed against his chest, his brain was reeling.

A modicum of sanity returned to him at the last possible moment. He pushed her away from him, so hard that she nearly fell.

After Tomorrow

Lydia Lancaster



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Foreword

DeWitt Clinton was a real person, as everyone knows.

Charles Grandison Finney was also a real person, a fiery evangelist of some great fame at the time of this story. Mr. Thurlow Weed was as real as the *Evening Journal* in Albany, and the New York State National Bank was an actual bank.

Mr. Tyrone Power, a forebear of our own Tyrone Power of recent years, was one of the most famous actors of the time of this story, and Mrs. Austin and Miss Fisher were famous actresses of the period.

With the exception of these people, all other characters in this book are fictitious.

The incident in which a many-sectioned log raft caused a three-day tie-up at the locks when the lockmasters threw up their hands and walked off the job actually happened as did the one where a bridge was so crowded with spectators at a lock fight that it collapsed and plunged the spectators into the water.

The modern-day lightweight sulkies used in trotting races did not come into use until sometime around the Civil War. Prior to that, ordinary buggies were used, or sometimes carts.

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CONTRITION started, the picture of guilt and fear, when her step-father's hand descended on her shoulder, grasping it with such force that it made her gasp with pain. How in tarnation he'd ever managed to sneak up on her when he was supposed to be plowing in the west field was more than she could understand. She'd made sure that he was well out of the way before she'd ventured into his bedroom to rifle through his chests and drawers, searching for whatever money he might have on hand.

Not that she'd expected to find much, because Amos Reeves never kept much cash in the farmhouse, but any amount, no matter how small, would have been welcome if she were to carry out her enterprise, which was to make tracks away from this farm as fast as her two feet could carry her and never come back. For all that the farm was one of the most prosperous in Cayuga County, Amos was the most tightfisted man in the state of New York, holding that to have money on hand was to be tempted to spend it. Contrition wouldn't know about that, never having had any of her own.

"Thief! Satan's spawn!" Amos thundered, his face black with fury. His right hand being engaged on Contrition's right shoulder, he brought his left hand down on her left shoulder and jerked her around to face him. Towering over her even though he wasn't tall for a man, his strength being made up of broadness rather than stature, he began to shake her. His face, well covered with a bushy beard that showed more gray than black, was contorted with the fury that consumed him. He shook her until her head bobbed on her neck and her dark hair in its one thick braid flopped first over one shoulder and then the other.

Contrition kept her right hand clenched, no matter how hard the shaking. She was obliged to keep it clenched in order to hide the three shillings and scattering of penny pieces she'd found in the corner of Amos's dresser drawer, less than she'd hoped for but more than she'd expected to find.

The shaking stopped, and Amos's left hand grasped her right wrist, and he exerted pressure. Contrition bit down on her lower lip to keep from shrieking with the pain. Let him break it, blast him, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of crying out, any more than she'd ever given him the satisfaction of crying out when he'd whipped her when she'd been a child, even though her mother had begged her to cry so that he'd stop. Lelia Reeves had never been able to stand up to her husband, but Contrition was made of different stuff.

Refusing to cry did no good. The pressure increased, with a twisting motion now, and her hand flew open and the coins spilled onto the random-board floor, some of them rolling under the bed. There was no rug or carpet to stop them. Amos didn't believe in worldly pampering such as floor coverings, no matter that the boards were cold enough in the winter to freeze your toes when you got out of bed on a below-zero morning.

Her nemesis's eyes narrowed, glittering in his lowering face. "So I was right, you were stealing from me! And you're dressed in your second-best dress and wearing shoes!" Wearing shoes in the spring or summer, in the house, was another infraction of Amos's implacable rules. Shoeleather cost money, and there was no need for a girl of seventeen to put him to the expense of having footwear repaired by wearing shoes in the house when the weather was mild.

Contrition pressed her lips together and remained silent. She'd been caught red-handed and anything she said would only make matters worse.

"What were you about? What devil's business were you fomenting?" Amos demanded, his hand tightening on her wrist.

She'd be a ninny to answer that, Contrition thought. If Amos knew that she'd been about to take leave of his company permanently, he might kill her this time, rather than just beat her senseless. She

had no defense against him, not even her mother's useless pleadings, because Lelia had died when Contrition was twelve, and there were no brothers or sisters to come to her aid, there was no one else in the house at all, and even if Orville Welles or Zeke Flemming, the two permanent farmhands, were close enough to hear her screaming, they wouldn't dare try to help her. Orville was over seventy, and Zeke a wizened lad of fifteen, employed by Amos because one was too old and the other, too young to command decent recompense.

No more help than the two half-men could give was needed on the farm. Amos, with his bull-like strength, could and did do the work of two men, and there was Contrition to take up the slack, doing the easy chores of washing, ironing, cooking, scrubbing, baking, sewing, carding wool and spinning it and weaving it into homespun, tending the flock of chickens, digging up and planting and tending the kitchen garden and preserving what she could against winter, and other small tasks such as shoveling out the horse and cow barns. She also made lye soap, doctored ailing animals, drove the hay wagon and hitched and unhitched and took her turn at pitching hay, and any other such trivial task that didn't need a man to accomplish it.

Contrition's mother had never been much help at all, a fact that had caused Amos to consign her soul to hell. That Lelia's frailness had been the direct result of Amos's having beaten her nearly to death when she'd tried to take Contrition, at the tender age of eighteen months, and run away from her lawful spouse was beside the point. She'd lasted until Contrition was of an age to take her mother's place in the house and lend a hand outside, and as far as Amos was concerned, it had been more of a blessing than a tragedy when she had died and he no longer had to feed her.

Lelia had borne Amos no sons, or daughters either, and if her failure was also due to the beating Amos had inflicted on her when she had tried to run away, still it was her fault and not his. She'd owed him loyalty for having married her and saved her from shame when she'd been in mortal need of a husband, and the substantial payment that had come with her, that had enabled him to buy this farm, was no more than his due for his Christian charity. He'd got

the worst of the bargain and, as far as he was concerned, he was well rid of a woman who profited him too little.

Amos considered himself a heavily put-upon man. Not only had his wife turned out to be worthless, denying him the sons whose help would have enabled him to prosper a great deal more than he had, but now this sole issue of his deceased wife's body had turned thief, no doubt to run away from him and deny him her services after he'd fed and clothed and reared her. Why else would she be decked out in her second-best dress of the two dresses she owned, not counting the one that was little more than a rag that she wore for everyday work? And helping herself to his hard-earned cash!

It was too much to be borne. Contrition must be taught a lesson she wouldn't forget. Amos slapped her across her face with such force that she went spinning across the room. He was after her, dragging her to her feet again before her head stopped ringing.

"We'll see what the horsewhip will do to drive your sinful notions out of your head!" Amos told her. "Get downstairs and out to the barn!"

A shudder ran through Contrition's body. She'd had more than one taste of the horsewhip, but never for such an offence as she'd committed this time. This time, she knew, Amos would take every inch of skin off her back, and she might end up as broken as her mother had been.

The stairs in the farmhouse were twisting and narrow, built inside the wall with sharp turns at the top and the bottom. Amos had just dragged the struggling girl to the top of the staircase when her eyes fell on his feet. He was stocking-footed; his boots must have raised another blister on his heel and he'd come back to the house to change them, leaving the muddied ones on the kitchen porch for her to clean.

Amos was shoeless, and Contrition was wearing shoes. Without as much as thinking about it, she brought her foot down on Amos's toes with all her weight. Then she was loose from him and running down the stairs that opened into the kitchen. Amos's roar of fury followed her, close on her heels in spite of the fact that she was sure she'd broken at least two of his toes, or maybe three or four. He was too angry, too shocked by what she'd done, to feel the pain yet.

Contrition could feel his breath on the nape of her neck even as she lunged for the squirreling rifle that Amos kept on a bracket near the kitchen door. The piece was loaded, it was always loaded, and Contrition had it in her hands at the last possible moment as she whirled to face the demon of retribution who was bearing down on her.

"If you take one more step, I'll let you have it right between your eyes! You know I won't miss!"

Amos stopped.

Contrition backed through the door, still aiming the rifle at Amos. "I'm leaving. If you follow me I'll shoot you," she said.

"Thief! Ungrateful daughter! Whelp of Satan!" Amos bellowed, too outraged to realize that he was repeating what he'd said only moments before. His vocabulary wasn't all that extensive in the first place; probably he couldn't have come up with anything different even if he'd had time to think.

"Thief I would have been if you hadn't caught me at it. Whelp of Satan I may be, because my real father is probably a devil or he wouldn't have misused my mother so. Daughter of yours I am not, and I thank God for it, because if I was your daughter I'd kill myself!"

She backed all the way out of the kitchen yard, covering the door, before she turned and began to run. She could run fast, and she could run for a long time without tiring. Her body was slight but it was lithe and wiry and she was strong, much stronger than other girls of her age.

Not that she had much basis for comparison, because Contrition knew no other girls of her age. Of social life she had none, and she had never, grown-up as she was, as much as set foot in a church to mingle with other people or been to a party or to any gathering of friends and neighbors. If Amos had gone to church, he would have been expected to put into the collection box what was better in his own pocket, and if he had allowed the young men of the neighborhood to see his stepdaughter, one or more of them might have taken the notion to deprive him of the services she owed him for rearing her and giving her a name.

Contrition was in as pretty a pickle as could be imagined. Her

bundle was still under her bed at the farm, her few personal belongings wrapped in a shawl for easy carrying, and the money, as little as it was, that she had hoped would help her on her way was beyond retrieving as well. Stealing, Amos had said! A few paltry coins in return for a life of servitude and abuse! Penniless and with only the clothes on her back, she was now obliged to face the world with only her wits to keep her from starvation or recapture.

Thinking of capture made her turn her feet from the narrow dirt road at the first opportunity and plunge into the woods. Broken toes or no broken toes, Amos would be after her, and Contrition had no real desire to kill him because if she killed him she'd hang for it, killing your stepfather being looked upon askance in this year of 1833 in the state of New York, and, as far as Contrition knew, everywhere else in the world. Therefore, she must contrive to keep well ahead of Amos and well out of his sight, in spite of having the advantage of the rifle. The stolen rifle, she reminded herself. Could they hang her twice, then, once for killing Amos and once for stealing the rifle?

She put her hand to her throat, feeling the noose tighten around it, and ran still harder. She had two intentions only: to survive and to make her way to Albany and find the man who had plunged her mother into hell by taking advantage of her, a servant in his own house, and then paying Amos Reeves, the brutal, almost middle-aged farm laborer who'd worked on a farm that his father owned outside the town of Albany, to marry her mother and remove both of them far enough away so that no word of his perfidy could get back to his fiancée or to her family.

Once she reached Albany, Contrition meant to exact payment for her father's sins, payment so heavy that he would wish he were dead. Contrition was going to bring her natural father to ruin.

How she was to go about this, she had little idea. She only knew that she was going to do it. She'd blacken his name, she'd bring him to ruin, and his entire family with him, and only then would she be content, having at last revenged her mother and herself.

The trouble was, right at the moment, that she was going to be almighty hungry before she reached Albany.

Albany was on the Erie Canal. She could take the towpath, as so

many wayfarers did, girls and women as well as men and boys. It would be direct and there would be no chance of getting lost. She might even be lucky and get a free ride on a raft in return for whatever work she could turn her hand to, washing and cooking for the rafters or mending their clothing. Orville had told her a good deal about the towpath; he'd done a deal of traveling before he'd gotten so old he'd had to settle for working for Amos Reeves.

But the towpath would be watched; it wouldn't be safe. There would be unsavory characters who wouldn't turn a hair at turning her in for the reward that Amos would post for her. News traveled fast on the towpath, and she'd be apprehended and returned to Amos before she was anywhere near Albany.

Shank's mare, then, with no hope of rides. Back lanes and bypaths, keeping well out of sight. Thank Providence that it was spring, well into April and a mild spring at that, and that she was adept at snaring rabbits. She had a way with animals. She just might get past even the most vicious farm dog and raid a henhouse for eggs. Stealing again, but what was a body to do when she dared not ask for employment? She'd steal only from prosperous farms, she decided, ones that wouldn't miss what she took. When you had a compelling goal in life, such minor details as stealing a hen or a few eggs had to be disregarded.

It had been near nine in the morning when she'd made her escape from her stepfather. She had stopped running long ago, but she'd been walking fast and steadily all day—according to the position of the sun, it was well onto four in the afternoon. She'd made fast time on deserted country lanes, and taken to the woods every chance she'd got, always keeping an eye on the sun so that she'd keep heading northeast, toward Albany. How long it would take her to reach that metropolis she had no notion, having no clear idea of exactly where it was except for what her mother and Orville had told her.

There had been no reason for her mother not to tell her everything because Amos had made no bones about letting her know, from the first words of English she could understand, that she was a bastard. It was one of Amos's ways of punishing her mother for not being more of a help to him and for failing to give him sons. Women were

men's property, and when a man owned unsatisfactory property, he had a right to be dissatisfied and to curse the fate that had saddled him with it.

She put one foot in front of the other with dogged determination. She might not be tired but she was hungry. She was used to three hearty meals a day, coarse and simple fare but plenty of it, because food was the one thing Amos didn't begrudge, food being necessary to fuel the body for working. Clothing, shoes, much less ribbons or other gewgaws that made a female's life worth living, were denied with no appeal.

Well, I'll just have to go hungry tonight, she told herself crossly. She didn't dare scavenge from a farm this close to home. Amos would either have hitched up a horse himself and taken to the roads to spread the news of her running away or, if his toes were actually broken, he would have sent Zeke. He wouldn't send Orville because Orville might keep right on going, but Zeke wouldn't dare disobey his master. And if she were taken and returned to Amos, her life wouldn't be worth living from this day forward. Not that it had ever been much worth living, but it was all she had.

In a thick patch of woods, she found a clear-running stream and assuaged her thirst. The water was delicious and she drank enough of it to fill her stomach so that the hunger pangs weren't quite as acute. The sun was getting on toward setting now, and she turned her attention to finding a safe place to sleep. A mass of tangled berry bushes just leafing out seemed to be the most promising. Wild raspberries were almighty prickly; nobody would be likely to think she'd wriggled her way into the middle of them, and even less likely to wriggle in themselves in search of her.

Like a dog, she turned around and around in the center of the bushes until she'd made a satisfactory place to curl up. It wasn't as soft as her cornshuck mattress at home, but at least she wouldn't freeze, the danger of a late frost being past.

In spite of her hunger and the strangeness of her surroundings, she slept soundly, having youth and strength on her side. She wasn't afraid of woods creatures; she reckoned that they'd leave her alone if she left them alone. It was possible that there were wolves in the

woods; one or two were still seen occasionally in sparsely settled stretches, but she had the rifle.

She woke only once in the night, dreaming of the fine, fat rabbit she'd snare tomorrow night when she'd dare to kindle a fire, if she could get one started the way Injuns used to, with a couple of sticks rubbed together, or some stones that would strike a spark. She'd have to be a lot hungrier than she was now before she'd eat a rabbit raw.

She woke at dawn and set out again, always heading northeast, keeping a sharp eye out for the proper kind of stones to spark a fire. She'd been stupid not to pack a flint and steel in her bindle and stash it a ways off from the farm before she'd made her break, but second thoughts spark no fires.

She passed farmsteads, but people were up and around and she didn't dare approach them, although the mental pictures of rich brown eggs tortured her.

It was the middle of the afternoon when she came across the cow. It was a brindle cow, strayed through some break in a fence to browse in the woods. Her stomach rumbled and contracted at the sight of the distended udder.

"Nice Bossy. Good Bossy," she murmured. "There's a good Bossy!" Her hands soothed the creature, a little skittish at first because she was a stranger. But cows were something she had known all her life, and a moment later she was squirting milk from a teat into her eagerly opened mouth, swallowing as fast as she could squirt. With a stomach full of milk, she'd be able to keep going until dark, and then she'd fashion some snares and tomorrow she'd have a rabbit. Things were looking up.

"Well, I'll be! What fairy child have we here, making such an unorthodox repast in the midst of the primeval wilderness?"

It was a masculine voice, its timbre pleasing even though the words were beyond Contrition's comprehension. With her chin dripping milk, Contrition made a grab for the rifle before she straightened to confront whoever owned the voice.

Her eyes widened, and she was happily unaware of the ludicrous picture she presented, with milk still dripping down her chin and her face filled with astonishment. This was no farmer come to hunt his

stray cow, this was a city man. He was a good deal taller than Contrition's five feet and one half of an inch but not as tall as the gangling Zeke who was just under six feet, for all he wasn't full-grown. It wasn't his size that made Contrition's mouth gape open, but the way he was dressed. She'd never seen a city man before. It was all she could do to keep from laughing.

He was wearing fawn pantaloons, very tight to his legs, and polished boots and a ruffled shirt and a tall hat, the very picture of a gentleman of polite society such as her mother used to describe to her. His hair, almost as dark as her own, curled over his collar. Hazel eyes under sweeping eyebrows regarded her with curiosity mixed with amusement until she raised the rifle and leveled it at him, her own eyes, as blue as a sunny October sky, having noticed immediately that he was also carrying a rifle, although it dangled from his hand pointing toward the ground.

"Don't you make a move! Drop that rifle, and walk away from it!" Contrition commanded. He was hunting her for certain sure. Why else would a city man such as he be out in the woods in such an outlandish outfit? "Do it now!"

The young man obeyed, his face paling a little.

"Go further, a good ways further!" Contrition snapped. "I know how to shoot this gun, and don't you go athinkin' that I don't!"

That was no more than the truth. Contrition was a crack shot, having been depended on for the past several years to add to the larder when the salt meat that was their fare in the winter began to pall and fresh meat was something to be desired. Her rabbit snares had filled a good deal of the need but squirrel was even tastier.

"Is this far enough?" the young man inquired. "A dryad with a rifle! No one will ever believe this!"

"I am not!" Contrition said. "Whatever it was you called me. Stand still or I'll be obliged to put a hole right through your leg."

Keeping a wary eye on him, she inched forward until she could lean down and pick up his abandoned gun. Stealing again, two firearms in two days, she'd surely hang if she were taken. But it couldn't be helped. She could hardly leave the rifle with him; he'd come after her, and then she'd have to shoot him, and that would be even worse.

She was pondering what her chances would be in tying him up, except that she had nothing to tie him up with unless she sacrificed a good part of her shift, when he reacted in a manner so entirely outside of her experience that she was paralyzed, without the faintest notion of how to react back. His hands clutched at his stomach, his legs went out from him, and he writhed on the ground, moaning as though he were dying.

"The pain, the pain!" His voice was anguished.

No man who wasn't dying could look like that, his face drawn in torment, his contortions enough to wring pity from Beelzebub himself. Contrition took a cautious step forward, her face filled with concern. Then she took another step, and another, until she was standing over him looking down at him. There was no danger, because a man so mortally stricken could do her no harm.

"What is it? Can I help you?"

His hand shot up and grasped her wrist, and he gave a powerful yank and Contrition tumbled down on top of him, both rifles flying. She screamed with fury.

"You tricked me! You tarnation rapscallion, you tricked me!"

"So I did. An admirable performance, no matter how dastardly! My colleagues would have been proud of me. But I never thought that a dryad would need her mouth washed out with soap. Such language from the lips of a child! Stop struggling; I'd mislike to have to hurt you."

"Let me go! I won't hurt you neither, I'll just make tracks. You don't have to go aturnin' me in, after I didn't shoot you when I had the chance! You can return the favor by pretending you never seen me."

Her captor seemed to be considering, but then he shook his head.

"Not a bit of it. My curiosity is aroused. Who are you, from whence do you come, and what mischance of fate has turned a dryad into a fugitive?"

"You talk funny," Contrition said.

"So I have been told, by heads older and wiser than yours. You still have not answered my question. Do you have a name?"

Contrition yanked at her captured wrists, feeling like a fool

sprawled on top of her captor. But for all his foppish way of dressing, he was strong, and his grip wasn't loosened.

"It isn't Dryad," she said, her eyes smouldering.

"Not a wood nymph? Then where do you come from? Not out of the nowhere into the here, surely. You must live some place."

"I don't."

"A dryad, then. My first surmise was correct."

"Don't you call me that! I don't know what it means but it doesn't sound very nice!"

"You are mistaken. It is quite nice indeed." A light dawned in the young man's eyes. "I have it! You're fleeing from a wicked stepmother!"

"I am not! It's my stepfather . . ." Contrition's eyes widened with dismay. Now she'd let the cat out of the bag for sure, if her captor hadn't been sure of who she was before. "But it's no concern of yours, so you might as well let me be on my way. Amos is too miserly to pay much of a reward for me anyhow."

The young man's eyes were speculative as he digested this tidbit of information. "Maybe any profit, no matter how small, would interest me."

"A rich man like you!" Contrition blurted out. He had to be rich or he wouldn't dress like this, and his hands were soft, too. They'd never done an honest day's work or her name wasn't Contrition Reeves.

The laugh that pealed forth made her eyes widen even more with confusion. "Wealthy? Right at the moment, Mistress Dryad, my pockets are as empty as a Halloween pumpkinhead, and my stomach even emptier. Where are you faring, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"You kin be so bold, but I'm not agonna answer."

Her captor winced. "Such grammar, or I should say, such lack of it! And your disposition leaves a great deal to be desired. Unlettered and unmannered, what an unfortunate combination!"

"I'm always mean when I'm hungry." That may or may not have been a lie because Contrition had never been hungry before, but it seemed as good an answer as any. "And now you've scared the cow away or we could both have had some milk."

Her captor winced again. "The loss of the cow is my fault

entirely, I agree. Lacking the cow, I suggest that you come along with me without making any undue fuss. The fare will be less than sumptuous, but it will be filling. If I let you loose, will you promise not to run away? It wouldn't avail you anything in any case, as my legs are considerably longer than yours."

"I ain't goin' with you."

"From where I'm lying, so uncomfortably on the ground with you on top of me, it doesn't seem that you have any choice. I have no intention of leaving you in the wilderness alone, so you might as well come along without a struggle. The more docile you are, the sooner we will arrive at our destination. We have a considerable walk before us, but we should be there well before sunset. Can you hold out that long?"

"I can hold out longer than you can. Where are you taking me? I don't fancy having supper in jail."

The young man shuddered. "No more do I. Have no fear, Mistress Dryad. Sheriffs and I are anathema to each other!"

"Are you some kind of a furriner? You surely don't talk English very good. I can't make sense out of half you say."

"I speak English quite proficiently, I believe. I could only wish that you understood it."

Seeing that there was no way that she could get away from this disagreeable fellow, Contrition clamped her mouth shut and took out her frustration in glaring at him. Taking her silence for assent, her captor released her wrists and allowed her to get to her feet. Following suit, he scooped up both of the rifles and set off, and since it took all of Contrition's energy to keep up with him, she wouldn't have had any left over to rail at him in any case. As it was, she was forced to half-run.

He looked back and down at her when she stumbled over an exposed root. "Sorry. I forgot that you're so small."

"A likely story! How could you forget when you keep grabbing my hand to haul me along?"

"But a dryad isn't a real creature, it's a figment of the imagination, even if your hand in mine seems real."

"I'll show you whether I'm real or not!" Taking advantage of the two seconds' respite while her captor paused, Contrition kicked him

in the shin. As her shoes held no relationship to the dainty kid pumps that young ladies of fashion wore, but were sturdy farm shoes, as suitable for a man as for a woman, the kick inflicted considerable pain. She had the satisfaction of seeing that pain reflected on her captor's face and hearing him yelp.

"Vixen! I ought to leave you here in the woods to starve!"

"I wouldn't starve. I'm not as stupid as you are. I could have snared a rabbit tonight."

A yank on her arm was her only answer. The pace quickened, the stride lengthened. Contrition, held fast by his hand on her wrist, had no recourse but to keep up as best she could, determined that he wouldn't outlast her no matter how far a piece they were heading.

It wasn't so very far, after all. Three-quarters of an hour more of rapid walking brought them to their destination, two Conestoga wagons camped in a sparse glade of trees not far from a narrow dirt road. Four sorry-looking horses were hobbled nearby cropping the tender spring grass. Smoke from a campfire rose straight up toward the heavens. Several people were in evidence, all of them dressed in what Contrition, in her innocence, took to be the essence of finery.

A slender, impeccably dressed man of more than middle years, his silvery hair long around his neck in a most distinguished fashion, straightened from poking at the smoking campfire. The fire was smoking like sin; Contrition could have told him that he didn't know any more about building a fire than he knew about plowing a field, which from his appearance he had certainly never done.

"Ho, young nimrod! That's an unusual bag you've brought back from your foray, I must say! Rather large for a rabbit, is it not? A young doe, perhaps?"

"A dryad," her captor said, grinning. "As to her age, who can tell? She looks to be all of twelve, but being a dryad, she might be over a hundred."

"I'm seventeen!" Contrition said indignantly.

"A blatant falsehood. I'm afraid we'll dine sparsely this evening, Mr. Yeats. As there were no rabbits to be had, I was forced to content myself with this stranger creature. What's in the kettle, beyond a lack of hare meat?"

The odors emanating from the blackened iron kettle might have

been without the aroma of stewing meat, but they spelled food. Contrition jerked at her wrist, and to her surprise, her captor released it. She walked over to the fire and peered into the kettle. Carrots and potatoes, which must have been sorely withered and wilted, the last of a crop stored in a root cellar over winter. Turnips. A few handfuls of barley. At least there was a lot of it, even if it fell short of being appetizing.

A movement caught the corner of her eye. Acting on pure instinct, she snatched at her rifle, and being caught unaware, her captor relinquished it. A shout of alarm from his lips went unheeded as she swung the rifle to her shoulder and snapped off a shot. The squirrel which had been scampering up the trunk of a tree a hundred feet away dropped to the ground.

"It ain't much, but it'll add some flavor. Iffen I had more time, and some lead, I'd bring down a few more."

"Modest child, isn't she?" the silver-haired man said, regarding her with benevolent curiosity. "But I concede that she's a good shot; I've seldom seen a better. Mistress Dryad, if our stalwart young friend here lends you the wherewithal to reload your firing piece, do you think you could add to the meager contents of the kettle? Two or three more squirrels would not come amiss."

"Are you out of your mind? She'd just as likely shoot one of us! I had a hard enough time capturing her without taking the risk of her murdering the lot of us and running off!"

"I never heard such nonsense in my life, even from you, Henry Davenport!" The sound of the shot had brought the others of this unlikely band of wayfarers gathering around, and a matronly woman, ample in girth and with her face wreathed in a welcoming smile, put her arm around this remarkable markschild. "As I just heard you say, she's no more than a youngster! Wherever did you find her?"

"In the woods, running away from her wicked stepmother. Correction, from her wicked stepfather. He beat her every day at rising and again before she retired to her pallet of cornhusks in the attic at night, and it's obvious that he starved her as well."

Contrition looked at the woman who was holding her so comfortingly. "Does he ever tell the truth?"

"Not if a lie will serve. We like him for all that," the woman

said. "Running away, are you? That poses a problem. I doubt not that there are laws against harboring runaway children."

"But we can hardly abandon her for her wicked stepfather to find, can we? He'd beat her three times a day rather than twice, adding a noontime beating to the rising and retiring beatings."

"Oh, stop it, you blabbermouth!" Contrition snapped. "Lend me some shot, I can still get another squirrel or two before the light's gone. I wouldn't waste a bullet on you when meat for the pot's more important!"

"Well said, extremely well said!" A portly, middle-aged man applauded. "Dolly, my love, what say you? Shall we risk harboring her, if only for the assurance of meat in the pot when there isn't enough money in the coffer to buy us a decent meal at an inn?"

"We can't turn her away with night coming on, at any rate. It wouldn't be Christian," Contrition's comforter declared. Contrition snuggled up to her. She felt no menace here, in spite of the presence of her original captor. The woman called Dolly seemed to exude safety and shelter. Besides, no matter her bravado when she had no choice, the notion of spending another night alone in the woods held little appeal to her.

Henry Davenport spread his hands in a resigned manner, clearly outvoted. "All right, but if she doesn't come back, it'll be on your heads, not on mine."

"I'll come back."

"What's your name, little girl?" Dolly asked. "We have to call you something if you're to stay the night, and Dryad won't do. Our Henry's too fanciful by far."

"Contrition."

"Contrition? What kind of a name is that? How under the sun did you happen to come by such an outlandish name?"

"I'll tell you after I've put enough meat in the pot so's none of us will sleep hungry," Contrition said. She had a conviction that these people meant her no harm, that it would be safe to confide in them.

Starved for human companionship, her heart yearned toward them, outlandish, gypsyish folk though they were. The sensation of having friends was so strong that she would have come back if Albany had been just over the next hill. Not that she wasn't still

going to Albany, nothing in the world would keep her from that, but in the meantime, it would be nice to continue her journey with a full stomach and a good night's sleep and the knowledge that there were kind and friendly people in the world.

2

It seemed to Contrition that she absorbed a lifetime of education in that first evening. While the pot simmered, with four plump squirrels making its contents savory, she sat on the ground with Dolly's arm around her and told her fascinated audience the circumstances of her escape from her lawful guardian.

Her audience, gathered around the fire as much for the protection the smoke gave them against mosquitoes and gnats as for warmth and light, was attentive. Talking at such length and having someone to listen to her was a new experience. Her mother had talked to her and listened to her, but since Lelia had died there had been no one except Orville and Zeke, neither of whom had been satisfactory as conversationalists. Amos spoke but rarely, and when he did speak it was to snap out orders or reprimands.

She found that she enjoyed talking with so many ears to listen, as though every word she said was of the utmost interest and importance. There were exclamations of shock, of sympathy, of understanding, all of which were balm to her soul.

"The scoundrel! The unmitigated bounder!" Jonathan Yeats, the silver-haired gentleman, exclaimed. "If I had been acquainted with Mister Gerald Haywood, it would have been a different story! I would have called him out, I would have seen justice done, and your unfortunate mother would have been properly and

legally wed to him rather than foisted off on that brute Amos Reeves!"

"I'd like to take an iron skillet to their heads, the both of them!" Dolly exclaimed, her voice quivering with indignation. "That I would!" She hugged Contrition closer. "Poor waif, poor little foundling!"

"Dolly, please show some respect for the English language!" her husband, the portly Anton Burnside, chided her. "The child is not a foundling. She is a bastard. No offence, little girl, but I do like correct usage of our native tongue."

"I don't mind. I've always known it," Contrition said. "There's a mort of bastards in the world. Amos is a bastard; that's why he was willing to let the Haywoods pay him to marry my mother. It was the best chance he'd ever have to make something of himself. And Zeke's a bastard; that's why nobody wanted him and he had to come and work for my stepfather."

"As was William the Conqueror," Henry said dryly.

Contrition had never heard of William the Conqueror but she let it pass, being more interested in defending her mother's good name.

"It wasn't my mother's fault at all," she told them. "It was a pure accident. My mother was a virtuous girl, but Effie, the other house hussy at the Haywoods', was free with her favors. And Gerald Haywood, coming home well blown with drink one night, came on my mother on her way back from the necessary, and in the darkness he mistook her for Effie. My mother had nothing to say about what happened till it was all over, and by the time Gerald Haywood realized his mistake it was too late. He'd thought Effie was teasing him, pretending to put up a fight, because she liked to tease and pretend she wouldn't. Not that that excuses him. It might have been a mistake, but Gerald Haywood still let my mother be given over to Amos Reeves in order not to have to face the consequences."

"Indeed he did! And a dastardly deed it was!" Dolly exclaimed.

Contrition got up and poked at the chunks of squirrel with a fork. "I think it's done enough. I'm mortal hungry."

"Hunger, my child, is a condition with which we are all familiar." Jonathan Yeats smiled at her.

"Why?"

"Because audiences are not always what they should be. Many a stand has slender pickings. 'Tis the fate of thespians."

"What's thespians?"

Every face in the circle around her registered shock and Contrition's education began.

"Actors, child. The noblest profession of them all! What other calling brings so much joy to the masses, who otherwise would live out their lives in dreariness with no respite from their burdens and cares? Thespians are actors and we are thespians. We are, to be more precise, the Olympians, famed throughout the state of New York, our name a household word in every city, town, and hamlet throughout the land."

"An exaggeration. Wherever our Conniewagons will take us is more like it," Henry corrected.

Her stomach full, and with the promise of a secure bed for the night in a Conniewagon with the two younger female members of the troupe, Contrition turned her attention to the sorting out of her new companions.

She already knew that the distinguished, silver-haired gentleman was Jonathan Yeats, a tragedian of the first water by his own admission, as well as versed in playing such diverse roles as physicians and lawyers and judges and lords of the manor, or kings or bulbous-nosed sots, depending on what was required of him. "I am a man of many parts," Jonathan told her, chuckling while the others booed. The pun passed over Contrition's head.

The owner of the Olympians was Anton Burnside, and Dolly, the matronly woman whom Contrition had already relegated to a mother-image, was Anton's wife of twenty-five years. Her captor, Henry Davenport, the young man whose main purpose in life seemed to be to aggravate her, helped tend the livestock, manhandled the stage sets, plunged into the woods to try to bring down small game for the pot when the pickings were poor—although to Contrition's way of thinking he must be a mighty poor shot—and meantime penned risible burlettas for the troupe to perform on the stage to fill out a program although he seldom appeared before the footlights himself. If he were as poor an actor as he was a hunter, Contrition could understand why. If she'd

had her wits about her, she never would have been fooled by his terrible performance when he'd tricked her into letting herself be captured.

Evangeline La Lune—Contrition thought she had never heard a more beautiful name, although the name was nowhere near as beautiful as Miss La Lune herself—was the leading lady. Evangeline's hair was golden and abundant, dressed in a multitude of curls and swirls such as Contrition had never imagined; her eyes as blue as Contrition's own. Contrition would have compared her to Venus if she'd ever heard of Venus. That the fair La Lune was slightly overblown never crossed Contrition's mind as she had so little basis for comparison.

As pretty as a picture, although not as flamboyantly striking, Carlotta Flechette was the second female lead, a deal younger than Evangeline, her hair and eyes chestnut brown, and her smile sweet and gentle.

Gavin Hurley, the leading man, was the handsomest human being Contrition had ever hoped to see. He must have been every bit as handsome as Contrition's real father, Gerald Haywood, whom her mother had described as the handsomest young Corinthian in Albany. Contrition had never heard of Adonis any more than she'd heard of Venus, but if she had, she would have been convinced that Gavin was cast in his mold. In his early thirties, a year or more younger than Miss La Lune, his hair was almost as fair as hers, his shoulders broad and his hips narrow, his eyes as piercingly blue.

Tucked into a corner, making himself small, was a mite of a brown-haired boy with a cowlick whose lower lip was thrust out, reflecting the scorn that roiled inside him. This was Jody, who disliked the troupe, who despised the precarious life of traveling from one place to another in search of places to play and who looked upon the world with jaundiced eyes at the advanced age of six, hating everything and everyone he saw. Contrition, who had never had a little brother or sister to love, smiled at him, yearning toward him, and was answered each time by a glare from his scowling face and a lowering of his brow.

"Lovey, you haven't told us why your mother gave you such an

outlandish name," Dolly Burnside reminded her. "Seems to me that she shouldn't have hung that on you, even if she was contrite."

"It was Amos who named me." Contrition defended her mother. "He labeled me with that name to remind my mother that she should be contrite because I wasn't a boy who'd grow up to help him work the farm. Not that he didn't make me work like a boy anyway, on top of my girl's work."

"It doesn't matter." Dolly tried to comfort her. "There's no female names on records anyway. All they say is 'female' on the census reports. You can call yourself by any name you like, and who's to say different? We'll think of something dicty to call you, never fear."

"Dianna, the huntress," Henry said, grinning at her.

"Why, that's a cruel lovely name! I like it!" Dolly cried. "It's just the name for her. She can be Dianna Laverne, that has a nice ring to it."

"You don't have to pick me a name. I won't be here long enough to get used to it. I told you I'm heading for Albany to bring my real father to ruin."

"And just how do you propose to go about such an ambitious venture? How would you get near him, an impoverished, uneducated waif with no entree to polite society?" Henry wanted to know, his voice laden with a mixture of curiosity and sarcasm. "Or do you intend to apply at his back door for a position as a scullerymaid? Even if you managed to gain entry to his house, which is improbable, who would believe your story if you were to accuse him? You'd undoubtedly be thrown into jail for attempted blackmail against a respected citizen. You'd have to be a great deal more accomplished and more intelligent, as well as have the means to appear at least reasonably respectable, before you'd have a chance."

"I'll find a way," Contrition said, with more confidence than she felt.

"You don't have to think about it right now," Dolly said comfortably. "You'd best stay with us for a while, until the hue and cry dies down. Your stepfather will have you posted on every inn hoarding, and there'll be a watch out for you and plenty of scallawags eager to collect the reward for bringing you in. Stay with us until it's safe to

leave; you can make your plans while you stay, and we'll all put our minds to helping you. Mister Yeats has a keen intellect. He'll think of something if no one else can. I'd mislike to see you returned to that brute Amos Reeves, Dianna."

"Don't call me Dianna. My name is Contrition. I don't like it but I'm used to it."

"You can't be called Contrition. It would be a dead giveaway. How many girls are named Contrition? Learn to answer to Dianna," Dolly advised her.

"Dianna or Contrition, she can't stay with us for long!" Evangeline's voice was sharp. "It's kidnapping, that's what it is! Or harboring a fugitive, and we'll all end up behind bars if we don't get rid of her as fast as we can!" She glanced at Henry out of the corners of her eyes, which immediately turned from hard to soft. "Not that I like turning her out, but we have to think of ourselves. If you hadn't happened on her in the woods, Mr. Davenport, she'd have made her own way somehow, so where's the difference?"

"Vangie, that's horrible! Of course we can't turn her out!" Carlotta's voice was filled with shocked protest. "It wouldn't be Christian! The poor child has no place to go and no one to turn to, and I for one am willing to risk harboring her. So are all the rest of us, I know we are!"

Henry's glance at Dolly was warm and approving. "Lotta's right. Dianna's only a child. It won't hurt us to do what we can for her. Who'd think to look for her among a troupe of traveling thespians?"

"I'm not a . . ."

A poke in her ribs by Dolly's elbow, which was surprisingly sharp for such a plump woman, kept her from adding "child." She didn't know why Dolly didn't want her to say that she was a woman grown, but she thought she'd better not insist on making her point until she found out why Dolly didn't want her to.

"I'm as sorry for her as you are. If we had any money between us, I'd be happy to put in my share to help her on her way." Evangeline was still looking at Henry, obviously wanting him to think highly of her human charity. "If she had a little money, she could manage until it was safe for her to find work as a mill mechanic, or a dairyhussy."

"She'll seek no work while we're this close to Amos Reeves's farm!" Dolly's voice was sharp. "We have to put a lot of distance between her and that villain before I'll allow her to leave our protection. Henry's right, no one would think of looking for her with us."

"I agree with Miss La Lune," said Gavin Hurley. "I vote that we send her on her way at the earliest opportunity. There is not only the danger of being discovered harboring a fugitive, but we are hard pressed to support ourselves without taking on another mouth to feed. A young and healthy girl can always find work. Contrition, or Dianna if you choose to call her that, could disappear into a cotton mill and be as well protected there as we could protect her, even more so."

"A mill mechanic!" Lotta cried. "She mustn't! I'll never forget how overworked I was, how ill I became, when I was forced to become a mill mechanic! If Mr. and Mrs. Burnside hadn't taken pity on me and allowed me to join the troupe without the customary twenty-dollar fee for an apprentice, I honestly believe that I would have been dead by now! I'll never agree to sending Dianna to be a mill mechanic, no, nor a househussy either! Not until she's older, at least. Let her stay, I'll share my food with her, I can manage on much less than I eat now!"

Lotta's eyes were filled with tears, her pretty face filled with distress. She rose to put her arms around Contrition and hold her close, defying anyone to send her away.

"Lotta is right. Dianna is going to stay. As for the matter of supporting her, remember the squirrels! She'll more than pay her own way simply by supplying meat for the pot." Dolly's voice was firm, allowing no further argument.

Contrition was doing some swift mental calculations in her head. As much as she wanted to get to Albany and bring her father to ruin, she knew that what Mrs. Burnside and Henry Davenport had said made sense. She wouldn't be safe this near Amos's farm, on foot and alone. She wouldn't stay with the troupe for long, just long enough to put enough distance between herself and Amos so that she'd dare to sleep at night if she kept her eyes open during the day.

She didn't like being beholden. Amos had made sure that she'd

known that she was beholden to him every day of her life for the food she ate and the clothes on her back and the roof over her head. Being beholden to anybody was something that she never intended to be again. But she wouldn't be beholden to the troupe. She was strong, she was handy, she could make herself useful. There'd be any number of things she could do to repay them for her food and such lodging as they provided her, and she'd make sure that they didn't come out on the short side of the bargain. And if Miss La Lune and Mr. Hurley didn't like it, that was their problem.

There was another reason she'd like to stay with the Olympians for a while, although it was so frivolous that she didn't like to voice it. She'd never seen playacting, and she'd never had a notion that she'd ever get to. It would be nice to see it, just so she'd know what it was all about. Her mother had told her that there was such a thing; Lelia had even been a spectator at a play when she'd been younger than Contrition, going with another servant on her day off in Albany. It had been the high point of her life, and Contrition reckoned, accurately, that her mother had never had another completely happy day in her life.

She'd stay, then, for as long as she felt she needed to or for as long as they'd have her, whichever came first. "I'll wash up the dishes now, I'll fetch water from the brook if you'll tell me where the bucket is." Her stomach purring, well filled after her long hunger, she was ready to begin working for her keep. "There's a fine brook just over yonder, I seen it when I was after the squirrels."

Henry winced. "You didn't seen it, you saw it."

"What's the difference how I say things so long as you know what I mean?"

Henry rolled his eyes heavenward. "Probably none, as far as you are concerned, but it would be a kindness to the rest of us if you would cease to assail our ears with your deplorable grammar."

"Well, you don't hardly speak English at all, always using big words nobody ever heard of! There's the bucket over there. I'll be off."

"Land amercy, what a sweet child!" Dolly said. "Ready and willing to be accommodating. We won't be sorry we took her in, I'll be bound. Washing dishes was never my favorite pastime, and

Vangie won't do it because it would spoil her hands, and Lotta shouldn't always be stuck with the task. Dianna'll come in handy, and I have a feeling that she'll bring us luck."

"Oh, yes, doing a good deed will be sure to bring us luck!" Lotta declared, eager to placate Evangeline and Gavin. Lotta hated contention of any kind; her tender heart quailed at it. "It's like giving alms to a beggar—that's supposed to bring good luck. Dianna's a beggar, in a way, so it ought to be the same!"

Henry was amused by the thoughtful look that came over Evangeline's and Gavin's faces. What a superstitious lot actors were! He moved to settle himself with his back against a tree. "When I found the child in the woods, I didn't know what else to do with her except bring her here. It was obvious that she was in some kind of trouble and running away, and she's too young by far to look out for herself. I was certain that the kindness of all your hearts—" he emphasized the word "all"—"would constrain you to agree with me."

Evangeline looked virtuous and modest. Henry was careful not to let his amused smile spread to his lips. Gavin, he reflected, scarcely counted, because the handsome actor seldom had a thought in his head beyond impressing the world in general with his own handsomeness.

"Mr. Davenport doesn't like me much," Contrition whispered to Dolly after she'd washed up the dishes in the bucket of water that she had heated over the embers of the fire.

"My, you are a young one, aren't you?" Dolly said. "If you'd any experience at all with men, you'd know that our Henry likes you a great deal."

"He hasn't said one kind word to me, or about me!" Contrition insisted. "And Miss La Lune doesn't like me either, or Mr. Hurley."

"You don't know much more about women than you do about men," Dolly observed. "Vangie doesn't like you because you're female and young and pretty and therefore a threat to her. As for Gavin, pay him no mind. There's nothing in that handsome head of his but conceit. Purely selfish, the both of them, for all they're passable artistes. The La Lune doesn't warm up to any young female except Lotta, who wouldn't have the gumption to compete with her."

As for Evangeline, it's better that she thinks that you're over-young. That's why I poked you to keep you from insisting that you aren't a child. It doesn't matter that you told us that you're seventeen, any little girl would say she was older if she was running away."

"I am seventeen! I'm just small, that's all."

"Then mind you don't let Vangie see you with your clothes off! In that shapeless dress you're wearing, nobody could tell if you're developed or not. Seventeen, my, my! Not too young for our Henry. He's twenty-one, there isn't too much age difference there. Vangie's well up in her thirties although she'd scratch the eyes out of anyone who dared to insinuate it—too old for Henry by far."

"Mr. Hurley is way handsomer than Mr. Davenport, and way older. I should think Miss La Lune would like him instead of Mr. Davenport."

"There's too much professional jealousy between them. Each one has to be supreme," Dolly told her with the wisdom of her years and experience. "They'd never get along because both of them would want the other to admit that they were the most important as well as more beautiful, to say nothing of much more talented."

"All the same, it doesn't matter about my being seventeen and Mr. Davenport being twenty-one." Contrition's voice was firm. "I'm not looking to marry him. I only want a safe place to stay till I dast go to Albany. Besides, no matter what you say, Mr. Davenport doesn't like me. He should have left me be instead of bringing me here, seeing as that's how he feels."

"Henry wouldn't do that. He was afraid that some puke would come across you and then it would be all up with you."

"What's a puke?" There were a deal of words she didn't know, Contrition realized. Maybe staying with these educated people would be a better idea than she'd thought, even beyond the safety they offered. Learning big new words could be a help to her when she got to Albany and contrived to get close enough to the Haywoods to bring her father to ruin.

"A puke is a bounty hunter, a man who hunts people on the run for the reward. There's a mort of them, you'll have to keep your eyes peeled when you leave us. Black or white, it's all the same to

them as long as there's money in it. Do you think your stepfather will post much of a reward, Dianna?"

"Can't rightly tell. He'll be mortal angry because I ran away, to say nothing of stealing his rifle. I wouldn't have taken it, but it was the onliest way I could get away from him."

Dolly sighed. "Not onliest, Dianna. Only."

It was Contrition's turn to sigh. "You folks talk mightily peculiar. But I'll try to remember, iffen you want me to."

Dolly gave up for the moment even though she herself had had to learn to be meticulous about her speech. She'd fallen in love with Anton, when she'd not been much older than Contrition, after having attended a performance in which he was then a young leading man. Remembering the high romance of her elopement with Anton brought a pleasurable flush to her cheeks and a sigh to her lips.

A pretty slip of a girl she'd been then, for all she'd put on so much weight in her middle years. The daughter of a widowed and remarried shoemaker, with two full brothers, one half brother, and two half sisters, her family had been of moderate means but respectable, and eluding her stepmother and the company of her siblings and waylaying Anton at the inn where his company of thespians had been staying had been the most romantic adventure of her life.

The young actor had been so flattered by her admiration that he'd given her a free ticket to the matinée performance for the next day. They'd met again after the performance, and again the next afternoon before the last evening performance, and it had been love at first sight. When the Conniewagons that had transported the troupe from one village to another had pulled out the next morning, Dolly had been hidden in one of them, and by the time her outraged father had caught up with them it had been too late. Dolly had been disinherited on the spot. All these years later, she would have done it all over again because she had never had a moment of regret.

And now here was another runaway, and Dolly's matronly heart went out to her. Denied children of her own, having lost one in infancy and another even before it had been born, she was eager to mother whatever young, defenseless creatures came her way. She mothered Lotta because Lotta wasn't too bright or too capable of

standing up for herself. Evangeline La Lune, née Emmy Jones and now legally Mrs. Dermont P. Dimwiddle, would have rejected mothering if it had been offered.

As for young Jody, the obvious candidate for Dolly's mothering, he was as prickly as a thistle and wouldn't let anyone get close to him, much less mother him. Jody, Dolly had sadly concluded, was the most exasperating child she had ever come in contact with. A child who didn't even like his mother was hopeless.

Henry Davenport, when he'd accosted the troupe at another camping place much like this one and had paid over his twenty dollars for the season to allow him to join the troupe as an apprentice, clearly needed mothering. In spite of his insouciant manner, it was as clear as spring rain that the young man was hiding from someone or something. Whether it was the law or his family Dolly had no idea.

It was obvious that Henry was a cut above the rest of them, that he was a gentleman, and the fact that, although he had turned out to be an adequate actor, he never set foot onstage unless he was well disguised in some buffoonery role, was proof enough that he had no desire to be recognized. Giving him refuge gave Dolly no qualms because whatever it was he was supposed to have done, she was convinced that he hadn't done it. She might be softhearted but she wasn't stupid. She could read human nature and Henry's was one of the best she had ever come across.

It by now being well past sunset and the troupe needing to get an early start in the morning to find where Elmer Tibbs, their advance man, had posted their banner. Dolly decreed that they must all go to bed. Contrition banked the remains of the campfire carefully with ashes so that there would be an ember or two left in the morning. Henry watched her with sardonic amusement and Dolly with appreciation. The girl knew what she was doing.

Sleeping arrangements were simple. Evangeline and Carlotta shared one of the Conestoga wagons. Dolly and Anton slept in a small tent, and Jonathan Yeats and Gavin Hurley in another. Unless the weather was inclement, Henry chose to roll up in a blanket under the stars rather than crowd in with Jonathan and Gavin.

Lotta rummaged through her belongings to find Contrition a nightgown, well faded and frayed but welcome to a girl who had nothing of her own except what she was already wearing. Evangeline clearly resented her presence, but Lotta's friendliness made up for Evangeline's rudeness.

In spite of the strangeness of her situation, Contrition fell asleep quickly, her young, healthy body taking over without a "may" or "may not" from her mind. She woke once, a few hours after she had fallen asleep, to the sound of rain pelting on the canvas cover of the Conniewagon. Warm and cosy inside the wagon, she snuggled deeper under her blanket and fairly purred to be out of the rain, warm and dry and safe with her new friends instead of cold and soaked and lonesome somewhere in the woods. Her stomach was full, Amos would never find her here, and tomorrow was another day.

She awoke at the first hint of daylight, the habit of a lifetime. Carlotta and Evangeline were still both deeply asleep. Contrition bit her lip to keep from laughing as she realized that the gurgling noise she heard emanated from Evangeline's parted lips. The beauteous La Lune snored!

The temptation to snuggle back into her warm nest and sleep for another hour was overwhelming, but she gritted her teeth and got up and dressed. She'd told her benefactors that she would work for her keep, and work she would. The first task of the day would be to search out wood dry enough to burn and get a fire started, because the rain would have doused the embers no matter how well she had banked them.

The campsite was quiet except for louder snores issuing from the Burnsides' tent—masculine snores this time. There was no sign of Mr. Davenport; he had obviously taken his blanket and repaired to the shelter of the other men's tent when the rain had started. Perversely, because she still smarted from Henry's unkind remarks about her age, she hoped that he'd gotten wet before he'd gotten under cover.

It was going to be a sunny day in spite of the unpromising weather of the night before. Hugging herself, shivering, Contrition was glad

of that. Since the ground was still soggy, she removed her shoes and stockings and reached up to put them back into the Conniewagon. Then she hiked up her skirt and entered the trees to search for fuel for the fire.

It was full light before she managed to scrounge up enough firewood that was reasonably dry. If it hadn't been for the rain, starting a fire would have been easy. As it was, the fire pit was sodden. She raked the wet ashes aside and laid the twigs loosely, putting a few larger sticks on top. A cheery fire would be a welcome sight to the others when they got up, and she felt an altogether overblown sense of satisfaction. Then she jumped half out of her skin as a sarcastic voice behind her asked, "And just how do you propose to set it alight?"

Drat and blast! Contrition had neither flint and steel nor a locofoco in her possession, a fact she would have discovered for herself in another moment, and her ego deflated as though it were a balloon pricked by the jab of a needle.

"You didn't have to sneak up on me like that! You scared me out of a year's growth!"

"Which you can scarcely afford, being small even for your age," Henry told her. "I'll do it. You'd only waste a locofoco."

His hair disheveled, the night's growth of beard evident on his face, Henry was not a prepossessing sight as he knelt and struck one of the newfangled matches. Contrition had heard of them; Orville had told her about them after one of his infrequent trips to Weedsport, the nearest settlement of any size to the farm. An invention of Satan, Orville had said, because "'tweren't natural." Or of a German, leastways, a furriner, and that was near the same thing. Contrition hadn't known whether to believe him or not, except that Orville didn't have the imagination to make up something like that. But here was proof, the little stick that Henry pulled out of a long, narrow box flared and burned on contact with the air, as if by magic.

And then it went out.

"Hah!" Contrition said.

Henry gave her a baleful look. "The wood's wet."

"It is not. I was careful to find dry. Dry enough, anyways."

His face grim, Henry tried again. This time, one of the twigs

caught, at the expense of a burned fingertip. Henry said a word that Contrition found entralling. She'd never heard it before, but she wouldn't show him the courtesy of asking him what it meant. Its meaning was clear enough.

The twig went out and Henry tried again.

"Three locofocos. That's not very saving, I'd opine."

"One would have been enough if the wood had been dry."

"Who's making all that infernal racket? For the love of heaven, it's still the middle of the night!" Anton bellowed from his tent.

"Your new protégée thought it her duty to start a fire," was Henry's sour reply.

Some words followed that made Contrition cringe. Then Dolly's voice, filled with reproof.

"Anton, dearheart, there's no call for such language. A fire will be most welcome on a morning like this."

"Then let her build it quietly!"

"All the same, her heart's in the right place. And it's time we bestirred ourselves anyway if we're to get an early start."

There were grunts and groans but no more unseemly words. The fire had caught on Henry's fourth try and the twigs were burning briskly. Contrition laid a few more sticks on it which Henry immediately rearranged. Giving him a baleful look, Contrition returned to the Conniewagon to retrieve her shoes and stockings. Her feet were freezing.

Something was missing from the Conniewagon, missing from the place she'd put it last night, close beside her pallet. She backed out of the wagon and dropped to the ground, her voice raised in indignant protest.

"Somebody's taken Amos's rifle! It was right here last night and now it's gone!"

"Stop that caterwauling! You'll wake everybody in camp! I took your blasted rifle, you little idiot! I backtracked and left it where it'll be found and returned to the man you stole it from."

"Without a by-your-leave! That's stealing!" Contrition was not in the least mollified.

Dolly emerged from her tent just in time to prevent mayhem, or at

least the attempt of it. She put her arm around Contrition and drew her close to the fire.

"Hush, now! He did it for your own good. Mayhap you'll get off easier if you should be taken, which we hope you won't, if there isn't a charge of thievery against you as well as of running away. I told you that Henry likes you. Why else would he have walked for miles, and got caught in the rain for good measure, when he could have been sleeping safe and snug in a tent?"

Contrition started to say something and then clamped her mouth shut. She looked at Henry out of the corners of her eyes. He didn't look as if he liked her. All the same, he'd put himself out for her so that she wouldn't be charged with being a thief.

"We'll get breakfast going," Dolly said. "Leave him be, Dianna. He isn't fit to live with until he's had his first cup of coffee."

Contrition turned to follow her benefactress, her mind in a turmoil. Mr. Henry Davenport was certainly a hard man to understand! All the same, she was mightily afraid that she was beholden to him.

3

THE banner was oblong in shape. Originally, it had been a bright red, but the color was faded now from years of sun and rain and weather. The bottom of it was deeply notched where a triangular piece had been cut out. A large, black letter O advertised the fact that it was the logo of the Olympians.

"Elmer rides on ahead to search out places we can play. Whatever he finds, an inn, a tavern, a hall, a barn, or even an open field where we can improvise a stage at a crossroads, he posts the banner along

with a placard telling when we'll perform. We follow along behind Elmer by a predetermined route until we find the banner,'" Dolly told an astonished Contrition.

"If we're lucky, it'll be a hall or at least a good-sized inn. But it won't be a hall this time because we lack the wherewithal to pay the rental or buy lamp oil for stage lighting—that's always extra. But Elmer will have found us some place. We'll play tonight even if it's to no more than a dozen people."

"Can I watch you play?"

"Lord bless us all! Of course you may watch us play. From the wings, as it were. You can scarcely sit in the audience where everybody would see you and word would get back to your stepfather as to your whereabouts. But you'll watch us play. And mayhap you can make yourself useful as time goes by. You can be a prompter, at least."

"What's a prompter?"

"You'll have a script in your hand and prompt any of us who might forget our lines."

"What's a script?"

Dolly was nothing if not patient. "The written-out play, the lines."

"I can't read."

"Heaven have mercy! Haven't you ever been to school?"

"Certain not. Amos wouldn't have allowed it, even if there'd been a school for me to go to, which there wasn't. He wouldn't have let me take that much time off from working. He can't read, neither." Contrition paused, and then she added, in order to mitigate the fact of her ignorance as much as she could, "I can figger a little, though. We had to figger a little, like how many gallons of milk and how many bushels of oats and potatoes."

"Can you write the figures?"

"Ain't no need. I got fingers."

"A veritable ignoramus!" Henry said, looming up behind them in that way he had. He must be part Injun, Contrition thought, to move so that a body didn't know he was there until he was right on top of her. "It confirms my first impression of her. Only an ignoramus would have run away with nothing but the clothes she was wearing and a stolen gun and no means of survival."

"I'd of done just fine!" Contrition snapped.

"That remains to be seen. You're young yet," Henry said. Contrition had been about to thank him about the rifle, as much as it would have galled her, but now she clamped her mouth shut again.

"It's no matter. Dianna's smart enough, we'll just have to teach her a few things," Dolly said complacently.

"Like reading and writing? Isn't she a little old for such basic education?"

"Make up your mind, why don't you? Either I'm a little girl not too old to learn, or I'm a woman grown!" Contrition snapped.

Henry's eyes were speculative. "Fourteen, maybe, at the outside. More likely twelve."

Dolly dragged Contrition away. "We have to pack up and get moving. Providence grant that the roads aren't so soggy that the wagons will bog down. And before we leave, we have to contrive something different for you to wear. It won't do for you to be seen in the clothes you left home in. Nothing I own would fit you; we'll ask Evangeline and Lotta."

Evangeline's eyes shoudered with indignation at the suggestion that she should part with any item of her wardrobe to be made over for the waif Henry had had such lack of common sense as to pick up and drag back to join their entourage.

"Don't look at me! I haven't half enough as it is! There's nothing I can spare!"

"You've more than I have. You're just selfish!" Lotta protested. "Never mind, Dianna, I'll find something." Lotta's head disappeared into a trunk, garments flew in every direction, and she came up with a faded pink dimity that was of a cut that Contrition had never imagined. It was the most outlandish thing she'd ever seen.

"The milkmaid costume!" Dolly said, clapping her hands. "It's just the thing! All we have to do is take off the laced bodice and take it up. You do it, Lotta, while I contrive something for her hair. Take it out of that plait and let's see what we can do."

Obediently, Contrition sat down on a fallen log and unbraided the long, thick braid. Freed from its confines, the hair spread over her shoulders to her waist, thick and dark, nearly raven black, and

lustrous. Dolly's breath caught and Lotta's eyes widened. It was a glory to behold.

There was a wince in Henry's eyes. "Cut it," he said.

Contribution clapped both of her hands over her head. "No! I don't want it cut off!" Her mother had always told her that her hair was beautiful. She didn't rightly know if she was pretty or not, there having been nobody to tell her since her mother had died, but at least she had her hair.

"Henry's right, I'm afraid." Dolly sighed. "We'll cut it short and put it up in rags, it'll make all the difference in the world."

Contribution sat tense, every muscle in her body rigid, her eyes screwed tightly closed, as the scissors began to snip. Lord have mercy, Dolly was shearing her like a sheep! There wouldn't be anything left, she felt naked, it wasn't even decent!

"Shorter," Henry said. Contribution felt like strangling him.

The scissors obeyed. Then Contribution's head was dunked in a bucket of water and she felt the sting of soap in her eyes as Dolly worked up a lather. A second dunking, her eyes burning, her shrieks filling the glade.

"I'm sorry, Dianna, but it'll take a better curl if it's good and clean," Dolly apologized.

"Make the rags good and tight," Henry said.

"What do you want me to look like, a pickaninny?" Contribution had never seen a pickaninny, but Orville had told her about one he'd seen, with a black face and short, curly hair like the wool of a black sheep. Cute as a little baby black duck, Orville had said, and Contribution could believe it, but she wasn't a little mite of a child; she wouldn't be cute at all.

"That's an idea. We might black your face as well."

"I'll run off first!" Contribution screamed.

"Hush, Dianna, he's only funning," Dolly assured her. "But he's right about the short curls. Nobody who doesn't know you well will ever recognize you from a description on a wanted poster without all that lovely hair."

Dolly made the rags good and tight, dozens of tiny coils twisted right to the scalp, until Contribution felt as though every hair on her head was being pulled out by the roots. Lotta pounced on the shorn tresses, straightening and smoothing them into one long hank.

"This will make a dicty switch! I'll be able to use it. My, I'm glad it isn't blond, else Vangie would have grabbed it for herself! It'll be beautiful twined in my own hair!"

"Nothing could make you beautiful!" a spiteful voice said. Jody, who had been a scornful spectator to the entire proceeding, gave Carlotta a baleful look. "You're ugly and scrawny and the hair's the wrong color. You'd ought to throw it in the fire."

"Jody La Lune, that's a mean thing to say!" Lotta gasped. "Why do you always have to be so mean?"

"My name isn't La Lune, don't you call me that! My father's name is Dermont P. Dimwiddle and so my name is Dimwiddle, too!"

"But your mama wants you to be Jody La Lune, so you have to be Jody La Lune." Lotta tried to reason with the small boy. "You have to do what your mama wants."

"Don't either. When I find my father, I'll be Jody Dimwiddle again and I'll never have a silly name like La Lune!"

"Jody, you mustn't go on thinking about your father." There were tears in Carlotta's eyes. "It doesn't do any good to think about him, it only makes you feel bad."

"No, it doesn't. I like thinking about him. And I'll find him some day, or he'll find me, and then I won't have to stay with this silly troupe any more! I'll get to go to school, and I'll be a clerk like my father and stand at a desk all day toting up figures!" Jody kicked at Lotta and darted off, to disappear among the trees, leaving Lotta gasping with pain.

"Poor mite." Dolly sighed. "Sometimes I think that Vangie should have left him with his father when she ran off from him. It isn't that she isn't as good a mother as she knows how to be, but Jody'll never make an actor, hating the life the way he does!"

"Evangeline ran off from her husband?" It was Contrition's turn to gasp. That was the most scandalous thing she'd ever heard. Here she'd thought that Jody was a bastard like she was, but he wasn't at all, and if he loved his father then his father must have been good to him. It wasn't like her own mother trying to run off from Amos because Amos was so mean.

"Bored our Vangie to tears, Dermont Dimwiddle did," Dolly

said. "That's why she ran off and joined our troupe. From what Vangie's told us about him, I can't say as I blame her. According to Vangie, if he'd ever smiled it would have cracked his face. Her family arranged the marriage; it was none of her doing. Dermont P. Dimwiddle was a serious, sober man, sure to be a good provider, and a decent, God-fearing man, which met with their approval. But it is sad, Vangie's being forced to run off from him else go mad with boredom, because now she'll never be able to see her own family again either. She's cut herself off from everyone and I only hope that she won't be sorry when she gets older. Jody's bound to go off from her when he gets old enough, if his father doesn't catch up with them and take him back first, and it's a sad thing not to have anybody."

Contribution could attest to that. Since her mother had died, she hadn't had anybody. Finding the Olympians had been the best thing that had ever happened to her. She'd only known them for one day, and they were no kin of hers, but already she felt as if she had somebody.

Breakfast was oatmeal, a welcome relief from the cornmeal that Amos had been partial to. There wasn't anything to go with it except coffee—no fried potatoes, no fried ham, no pie—but Contribution didn't mind. At least Amos wasn't glaring at her from across the kitchen table, telling her everything she had to do that day as if she had six hands instead of only two.

She washed up the dishes, feeling as if her head didn't belong to her with all those tight rags pulling at it. She must look a sight.

Henry loomed up behind her again, making her start. "Seeing that you were raised on a farm, maybe you can help hitch up. Jonathan's not much use at it, and Anton's likely to cuss a lot and get the horses riled, and Gavin's above such menial labor, so that only leaves me to hitch up both wagons."

"Certain sure I can!" As quick as a flash, Contribution was leading one of the horses to the wagon, backing it expertly between the shafts. She lifted a heavy horse collar without effort. Her hands were swift and sure, never faltering, as she arranged crupper and traces, as she fastened buckles and adjusted the bit. The animal stood docile as she talked to it. "Back up another inch there, that's right, whoa

now, stand still. That bit's too tight, isn't it? What dummed idjut did that? Never mind, I'll fix it. You won't go having your mouth hurt today."

Jonathan Yeats, having come to observe, stayed to applaud, bowing a courtly bow.

"Well done, well done! You are a virtuoso, dear child, you will be worth your weight in gold! Am I to understand that you can not only harness a horse but also drive a wagon?"

The spate of unfamiliar words didn't faze Contrition. She was getting used to it. She had already set aside a storage bin in a corner of her mind, dropping into it every unknown word along with its interpretation, or as near to it as she could come, to take out and repeat and return again against future need as the occasion arose.

"Certain sure I can drive," she said. What did Mr. Yeats think she was, a ninny?

Glumly, Henry left her to finish harnessing the other horse to the girls' sleeping-wagon while he went to tend to the other. It was a good thing that the child was turning out to be useful. He had enough trouble of his own without having to feel responsible for a waif he'd picked up in the woods. If he wasn't such a softhearted idiot, he'd have left her where he'd found her, having no desire to be burdened with the dead weight of a useless female if she'd proved to be of no use at all to the troupe and if it chanced that he might have to part company with his companions and make fast tracks.

But it looked as if Contrition would pull her own weight, and if he did have to vanish, he wouldn't feel that he was leaving a burden on the Olympians. Dolly would take care of the child—Dolly liked nothing better than mothering people—and he'd be able to leave with a clear conscience.

Lotta poked her head out of the sleeping wagon. "There! It's all finished! Come and put it on, Dianna, I want to see how it looks."

It fit her well enough, Contrition acknowledged, even if it still seemed outlandish to her. It was a little short because Lotta had taken it up enough to be suitable for a young girl not yet begun to mature, and the skirt was more full than any she had ever worn but, lacking the petticoat that was supposed to go under it, it hung all right. The tight, laced, vestlike thing that would have revealed every

curve of her bosom was gone, and that was all to the good if she wanted to pass as a little girl, but it only made her cross because it would reaffirm Henry's contention that she was a child.

Dolly climbed up into the wagon, puffing from the exertion. She poked at Contrition's hair with an inquisitive fingertip.

"Dry enough, I think. Bending over the campfire hurried up the drying, and that short it wouldn't take long. We'll see what we have."

One by one the rags came off. Dolly's brush darted here and there. Evangeline snorted, Lotta's hands were clasped in suspenseful anticipation, and Contrition was in a fret.

Dolly finished at last, after what seemed an eternity. She stood back to survey her work and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"There! Henry was right. Cutting it and frizzing it makes all the difference! You hardly look like the girl who came into our camp last night."

"I want to see!" Contrition said.

Lotta handed her a hand mirror. "It's beautiful, Dianna! It becomes you," she said, her smile bright but her words doubtful.

Contrition gasped, filled with both dismay and anger, at her first glimpse of herself. "Lordy! I'm not me at all. I look like a young'un. I don't look more'n eleven or twelve years old!"

Her hair, cropped so short, was now a mass of tight curls around her head. It made her face look rounder, her chin look childish. Combined with the milkmaid costume that had been shortened so much, she indeed looked like a child. And she wasn't pretty at all. There being no such thing as a mirror in Amos's farmhouse, she had never been sure before. Having seen her reflection only in scoured pans and in the pond on sunny days, she'd at least been able to hope that she was a little pretty, but she wasn't.

"The shoes!" Dolly exclaimed. "We'll have to find her some proper slippers. Those clodhoppers will never do!"

Lotta and Dolly both looked at Evangeline. Evangeline looked straight back at them, her face adamant.

"No," Evangeline said.

"But mine are way too big and Lotta's will be too big, too.

Dianna's feet are tiny and only yours will anywhere near stay on her."

"You'll have to make do with Lotta's, anyway. I have only two pair fit to wear and what if she spoiled them, and me the leading lady? You know how particular I am that every detail of my costumes must be perfect!"

Resigned, Lotta produced a pair of slippers. Contrition gaped at them. Flat of heel, they were mere scraps of soft leather, covering hardly more than an inch of the foot above the sole and with ribbons to lace them on. Worse still, when Lotta had laced the ribbons around her ankles, they wobbled on Contrition's feet as her feet swam in them.

"We'll have to stuff rags in the toes," Dolly said.

"We'll do no such thing. I'm not wearing them. Nobody will see my feet in the wagon, anyway."

"The condition the roads are in, we'll be doing more walking than riding," Dolly told her. "The horses will have all they can do to drag the wagons through the mire without our added weight, poor things."

"Then I'll walk barefoot." Contrition's voice was firm. "There's no use in ruining any kind of shoes by tramping around in the mud, anyway."

"We all walk barefoot when it's this muddy," Lotta told her. "Shoes cost money, and we can't afford to have them spoiled. Vangie has clogs to protect hers, but the rest of us just go without."

Evangeline rolled her eyes heavenward, clasping her hands on her breast in a dramatic gesture. "The stage, the glamorous life of the boards! An empty coffer! Walking barefoot through the mud whenever it rains! It's beyond my comprehension why I ever joined this troupe! An *artiste* of my caliber should be playing to adoring audiences in New York City itself, not in hamlets and villages to country bumpkins who have no appreciation of the arts!"

"You were happy enough to join us when we agreed to take you, a runaway wife with a child! Now you'd best turn your mind to rehearsing your lines as the Princess of France because Anton's set on *Love's Labor Lost* for our next stand."

"I know those lines as well as I know the lines on the palm of my

hand!" Evangeline protested, her face flushing. "Let Lotta look to her lines, as Rosaline! I'm tired of *Love's Labor Lost*, anyway. I wish that Henry would come up with something new and lightly romantical, as becomes my talents."

"But Henry plays Costard so well!" Lotta leaped to Henry's defense, her face shining with appreciation for Henry's rendition of the clown.

"All the same, the play has to be mutilated because we haven't sufficient cast for it. Rough comedy is all that can get through the thick skulls of the dolts we play to, anyway."

Eager to restore peace, Lotta offered to rehearse with Vangie. "We can say the lines while we walk; it will help pass the time."

"And mind you don't put more into them than the Bard intended!" Dolly admonished the leading lady. Dolly's voice was tart. "You're supposed to be a highborn lady, not a courtesan, flirting and smirking all over the stage."

Evangeline's nostrils flared. "I'll remind you that I've received ovations for those lines!"

Jody climbed up into the wagon in time to hear his mother's last words, and his face was filled with disgust. "They clapped because you stopped," he said. "Not because they liked you. You stank."

Lotta swept the lad behind her just in time for him to escape having his ears boxed for his impertinence. "Don't you go hitting him! He's only a baby!"

"He's old enough to learn some manners!"

The two actresses were still glaring at each other when Henry poked his head into the wagon. He took a long look at Contrition, and a grin spread across his face.

"What have we here! If only the child could read and learn lines, we'd have a built-in Puck, an admirable Ariel! Our waif could play those fairies beautifully with that slight figure and that cropped hair! We're ready to leave, ladies."

"I could learn if I had a mind to! But I don't have a mind to because I'm going to Albany to bring my father to ruin. I don't see why you can't remember that." Contrition's chin was set in a stubborn line. "If we're going to get started, let's do it! If I hadn't

let you drag me here, I'd be well on my way by now. I'd have started legging it at first light."

"And been caught before you'd covered five miles!" Henry told her. "Amos has had time to spread the word about your unorthodox departure from his farm by now, and everybody in the county will be on the lookout for you."

With that, Henry's head disappeared, and a moment later the wagon jerked to a start. Contrition sat down hard on the top of a trunk, and her voice was filled with derision. "Where'd he learn to drive, anyway? A body'd think he'd never handled a team and wagon before!"

"Likely he hadn't before he joined us." Dolly's voice was complacent. "A smart gig and a fast trotter would have been more his style. Dianna, you'd best keep out of sight under the canvas. If you need something to do, you can pray that we won't get bogged down. If we don't play soon, we'll have to learn to live without eating."

Contrition wasn't much for praying any more. She'd done plenty of praying when her mother had been alive, her chief prayer being that the bull, Angus, would gore Amos to death, or that Amos would slice his leg open with the scythe and bleed to death, or simply come down with a misery that would carry him off so that he couldn't abuse her mother any more. None of those prayers having been answered, Contrition didn't hold much with praying. Even if she prayed that the wagon wouldn't get bogged down, it wouldn't do any good, because who'd ever heard tell of God drying up a road for the convenience of travelers?

For the first half-hour all went well, even though the pace was slow. Then the first wagon got stuck in a low spot in the road, and none of Henry's urgings—or cajolings could make the horses pull it free. Henry and Anton put their shoulders to the wheel while Jonathan climbed down from the second wagon to take the reins, but still the wagon remained bogged.

Contrition stood it for as long as her patience would allow and then she was out of the wagon. Barefooted, she climbed up into the driver's seat and pushed Jonathan aside.

"Give me those lines," she said. "And tell those men to put their backs into it! I'll drive us out of here."

The men heaved, their muscles straining. Contrition used her voice and her hands. "Lay into it, you good creatures, you can do it! We both know you can do it, don't we? Good, strong beauties, that's the way, pull just a little harder, keep your feet under you, you've almost got it! Mr. Yeats, tell those idjuts not to let the wheels turn else we'll never get out of this. Giddap, giddap, that's the way!"

From his place beside the wagon, Jonathan Yeats applauded as the wagon lurched out of the mud trap. "Bravo! Miss Dianna, you are a veritable godsend!"

"Shucks, I could handle a team afore I could walk!" Contrition said modestly. She couldn't resist throwing Henry a glance of triumph. So he thinks I'm stupid, does he, she thought. Well, there's more'n one kind of stupid. Leastwise I can handle a team without letting the wagon bog down! And having got this one out of the mud, she proved it by driving the other through without a hitch.

Three more times on that sunshiny day that belied the condition of the roads, Contrition took over the reins, driving first one wagon and then the other through bad spots that would undoubtedly have stalled them if the men had been driving. Dolly and Anton and Mr. Yeats were loud and effusive with their praise, Carlotta was positively worshipful, and Henry glowered. Evangeline and Gavin were above it all.

It was coming on toward dark when they pulled into Auburn, keeping their eyes peeled for a glimpse of the banner that Elmer Tibbs would have placed for them. The rest of the troupe was tired and bedraggled from their stints of walking to lighten the loads. Evangeline was seething because her clogs hadn't protected her slippers. Of them all, only Contrition was in fine fettle, because what had seemed like a hard day's labor to the rest of them had seemed like a holiday to her. Hardened by her lifetime of toil on the farm, walking a little and driving a little didn't seem like any work at all.

They spotted the banner outside a tavern, and Evangeline sniffed.

"A tavern again! I was hoping that Elmer would be able to arrange for something better, at least an inn!"

Dolly silenced her. "We're lucky to have a tavern, and not have to make do with a barn or a field."

Elmer Tibbs came hurrying toward them. "We can camp just the other side of town. I'll direct you," he said, his comical, monkeylike face wreathed in smiles. It was hard to tell how old he was, but he was certainly in his late fifties, at least—a small, wizened man not a great deal larger than Contrition. "I was afraid you wouldn't get here at all, considering the condition of the roads! We're playing tonight, and if the audience is sufficient to warrant it, the host will allow us a second night. I was lucky to find a place to play at all. Auburn is a hard town, the people are highfaluting, used to the best, or so they say."

With curiosity or feigned indifference on their faces, the Auburn citizenry watched as the Olympians rolled down North Street to the outskirts of town to the place Elmer had scouted out for them. Contrition liked the little man, whose spate of words never seemed to stop.

"Yesireee! It wasn't easy to find a place to play, but if anyone can find a place, I'm the man! And who might this young lady be? I had no thought that you'd find a new member for our sadly depleted troupe out in the wilds!"

"This is Mistress Dianna Laverne. She isn't an actress yet, but she's mortal helpful."

"A delightful child! I can see her as Puck, as Ariel!" Elmer Tibbs enthused. Contrition glowered. This was the second time those outlandish names had been mentioned in connection with her, and she still didn't have any idea of whom they might be or what such roles might entail. Besides, she wasn't going to be an actress, she was only going to make herself useful until she could get to Albany and bring her father to ruin.

"Ariel is out of the question! We've nowhere enough members to put on such an elaborate play." Well, that was a relief anyway, Contrition thought. "But she could certainly learn Puck's lines."

"She's as pretty as a picture!" Elmer Tibbs beamed at her. "The role is perfect for her! I've never had the pleasure of seeing a more

comely little lass. Those eyes, those lips, the lively expression! She'll break hearts from New York to Buffalo, you have my word on it! Another two or three years, as she moves into young womanhood, she'll pack the audiences in! And I shall be there, leading the applause!"

Comely! Contrition's lips tightened. Hadn't she just seen herself in a mirror for the first time? She looked like a boy with her hair all gone except for those silly, short curls! All the same, it was nice of Mr. Tibbs to say that she was comely.

They made camp, grateful that it didn't look like rain. They prayed that no other troupe or other form of entertainment had come through Auburn in recent weeks so that the citizens would be eager to be regaled by their talents. Contrition busied herself at the campfire, contriving a supper out of the odds and ends of comestibles that remained. Evangeline grumbled at the biscuits that were a little charred on the bottom, Contrition not being used to cooking over a campfire yet, and at the scanty portions of stew, thickened with a little cornmeal to make it go farther. But Dolly said, "Be thankful that there's anything at all. Breakfast tomorrow will be plentiful, at the tavern. Hurry, hurry! Henry's already setting up the props, curtain is at seven o'clock, and we've yet to get into our costumes!"

Gavin was orating his lines, his gestures overdrawn, his part that of some man named Biron, which to Contrition's way of thinking wasn't a name at all.

"So study overmore is overdrawn. While it doth forget to do the things it should; And when it hath the thing it hunteth most, Tis won as towns with fire . . . so won, so lost."

And Anton was a king. "We must, of force, dispense with this decree; she must lie here on mere necessity."

Contrition managed to conceal her mirth for a good while, but when Evangeline, as the Princess of France, declaimed, with her mouth half-full of stew, "Fair, I give you back again; and welcome I have not had: the roof of this court is too high to be yours; and welcome to the wide fields too base to be mine," she lost control and burst into peals of laughter, nearly choking on her own last mouthful in her effort to hold it back.

Evangeline stopped throwing her arms around and glared at her, her face suffused with fury. "And what, pray, do you find so amusing? Are you a critic, a farmhussy who's never seen a play in her life, much less a masterpiece by the Great Bard, himself?"

"Nobody talks like that," Contrition said. "It's dumb."

"It is not dumb. Stupid is the word you're looking for," Jonathan instructed her. "Dumb means to be incapable of speech." He turned to Evangeline, a sweet and patient smile on his face. "But except for her deplorable lack of an adequate vocabulary, Dianna is quite correct. I could almost wish that you were dumb. Not so much expression, dear lady. You aren't declaiming that Rome is burning while Nero fiddles, which he undoubtedly did not because there were no fiddles as we know them in Nero's day. It is much more likely that he was plucking on a lute, an instrument he played with some talent. And restrain your gestures, you're likely to smite a fellow thespian directly across the face, swinging your arms about like that."

"Mr. Burnside, do I have to suffer these insults? Who is the director here, you or Mr. Yeats?"

"I am, my dear, I am. You are quite right. All the same, I think we should pay heed to Mr. Yeats' advice. Of us all, he has had the most experience, and in better companies than ours in his younger days."

Evangeline flung her empty bowl at him. Fortunately, it was a wooden bowl so it didn't break, and being empty, no stew was splattered on Anton's clothing. With that, she stalked off, the picture of outraged pique, to get into her costume.

My, Contrition thought, it certainly doesn't take much to start a fracas in this troupe. She shouldn't have laughed, but all the same, it was dumb. She couldn't for the life of her understand why any person possessed of his sanity would pay to see anything so dumb.

4

THAT evening, Contrition saw her first performance of a play. Well concealed behind a piece of scenery, she was as motionless as a puppet with no one at the strings. The La Lune had threatened to murder her if there was as much as a peep out of her.

The words and gestures were still, to her way of thinking, dumb, and the plot was so involved that it was difficult for her to make head or tail of it. But the costumes made all the difference. They were colorful and strange, and Contrition's uneducated mind neither knew nor cared that they were sadly lacking in authenticity. Evangeline, in a gown with draperies floating around her, was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen, and Henry was comical as the clown, even though Contrition wouldn't have recognized him if she hadn't already known him. Elmer Tibbs played a character called Hull, his antics making her clap her hand over her mouth so as not to let her delighted laughter escape.

Beside her, closer to her than he wanted to be because Jody never got close to anyone of his own accord, the little boy also remained concealed and watched with the utmost boredom as the play progressed. "Ha! Gavin just made a mistake!" Jody's voice was filled with satisfied spite. "He can't act worth shucks. He'd ought to be a farmer for all he knows about acting!"

"Hush!" Contrition admonished him. "If your mother hears you, she'll be angry."

"Let her be angry! She's as bad as Gavin is. My mother is dumb, Lotta's dumb, Gavin's dumb, Henry's dumb."

"Be quiet! I want to hear!"

Jody's face brightened as a round of hisses punctuated the dialogue. "Maybe they'll throw eggs and vegetables. Maybe a rotten egg will hit my mother right in the face!"

"Jody! That's wicked! Your own mother!"

Jody's face was filled with malice. "Mothers aren't supposed to be actresses. They're supposed to stay home and take care of the house. I wish she wasn't my mother."

"Be quiet back there." Gavin Hurley hissed. It was supposed to be a whisper, but being an experienced actor even if not a good one, his voice carried, and it was taken up by the unappreciative audience.

"Be quiet back there!"

Evangeline was seething. Lotta was near tears. Henry shrugged it off and Gavin was mortified and Anton collected himself and went on with his part as though nothing had happened.

Fortunately for the troupe, the audience allowed the play to progress to its end, the more unsophisticated among them wanting to see it no matter how poor the acting. But the applause was scant, only twelve dollars was added to the coffer, and the tavernkeeper told Anton that it wouldn't be worth his while to allow them to perform again the following night.

It was a dispirited troupe that left to spend another night in the open, rather than availing themselves of comfortable lodgings and a hearty breakfast.

"A fustian performance, I fear," Jonathan Yeats said with what equanimity he could muster up. "But at least we're better off than we were last night, and our next stand is bound to be more profitable. As Mr. Tibbs reminded us, Auburn is a difficult place to please."

"It was all Dianna's fault! Whispering and moving about behind the scenes, disrupting us! It threw us off; we shouldn't have let her witness the play," Evangeline declared.

"We stank," Henry said.

But it had probably been at least partly her fault, Contrition mourned as she prepared for bed, even though Lotta tried to comfort her and tell her that they had had unappreciative audiences before, when Contrition hadn't been with them. Because of her, they'd go

hungry in the morning, Anton being determined not to spend a penny of their meager funds in case of future catastrophe.

Well, if it was her fault that they'd go hungry in the morning, then it was up to her to do something about it. Tired from their day of travel and the travail of their unsuccessful performance, the thespians slept, but Contrition dressed herself in her own dress and her clodhopper shoes and crept out of the camp to see what she could forage.

"A miracle worker!" Elmer Tibbs exclaimed the next morning, his hair standing up on his head in tuffs, his face, still wrinkled from sleep, making him look more like a monkey or a pixie than ever. A bright fire was going, and the iron skillet was well filled with frying eggs.

"Hardly a miracle. Let us just say that the young lady is extremely adept at conjuring something out of nothing," Jonathan Yeats corrected the advance man. He peered over Contrition's shoulder. "So many of them! Surely you must have raided a henney!"

"Only a few farms." Contrition forebore to say how many. It had taken her almost until daylight, not wanting to pilfer more eggs from any one farm than might go unmissed. She added, even more modestly, "There'll be chicken and dumplings for our nooning."

She had already set the three plump chickens to stewing so they'd be cooked enough to drop dumplings in for dinner. She'd make enough to do them for supper, too. A little chicken went a long way, with dumplings. Making off with the chickens without raising an outcry had been a mort more ticklish than pilfering the eggs. At the farm where she'd taken the last one, the farm dog had come so close to setting up a racket that her hair had stood on end. It was a good thing that she had a way with animals, else she'd have had a backside smarting with buckshot this minute, if she hadn't been laid by the heels entirely.

Henry regarded her with suspicion. "I knew it. You're a dryad. Or else a witch, or should I say witchlet, considering your tender years? No mortal could get past barnyard dogs and make off with eggs and hens!"

"I got my ways." Contrition's face and voice were complacent

even though Henry's words made her seethe inside. She'd be dratted if she'd give him the satisfaction of knowing that his teasing bothered her. "Any idjut had ought to be able to handle a farm dog."

Life with the Olympians suited her. The work was so easy, cooking a few meals, washing a few dishes, and hitching and unhitching and driving a wagon when it was called for. Appropriating a few eggs and chickens from farms that could spare them hardly qualified as work at all.

All the same, she didn't like stealing, and if she had her druthers she wouldn't do it. She'd contrive to bring down a few squirrels before the light was gone today, and tonight she'd set some rabbit snares wherever they camped. They were running low on flour and coffee but maybe Mr. Burnside would spare enough for that if he didn't have to buy anything else.

Elmer Tibbs departed immediately after he'd eaten, riding out on a nag so old that Contrition wondered how he managed to coax it from one settlement to another. She herself would have dearly liked to walk the streets of Auburn, to feast her eyes on a real metropolis, to gape into shop windows at things she'd probably never be able to afford to buy, and to observe how townspeople behaved.

There was the prison, too, the pride of Auburn, but that cost money to see and she had none, even if she would have dared to let herself be seen, fugitive that she was. And there was the seminary where young men studied to become ministers—it looked like a real castle, Lotta told her, all built of stone—she'd dearly like to see that. But things being as they were, it behooved her to stay well out of sight, in spite of her changed appearance.

Her disappointment was short-lived when Jonathan Yeats sought her out as soon as breakfast had been cleared away.

"As we will not pull out until tomorrow morning, having hoped that we would play in Auburn for a second night, I bethought myself that we could use the time to advantage by giving you your first reading and writing lesson."

Contrition tried not to let her excitement at the prospect of actually learning to read and write show too much, in case Mr. Yeats might think it childish of her. She was getting almighty tired of

everybody thinking she was a little girl. "Can't see that I see any need to learn. I've never had no trouble getting along without knowing how, so far."

"My dear, innocent child! What of your plan to go to Albany and get close, by hook or crook, to the Haywood family so that you can wreak your vengeance? How think you that a lass of such ignorance could come by the acquaintance of such elite people without even the rudiments of an education?"

Contrition understood about half of what Jonathan said, the part that made sense but not the big words. It would pleasure her to know all those big words; they had a nice sound to them. "Well, if you don't have anything better to do, I'd be obliged."

"Jody has a slate and slate pencils. Henry supplied him with them when I undertook to teach him his letters."

Jody, being cornered and confronted with the request to borrow his slate, looked at Jonathan with greedy speculation in his eyes.

"How much will you give me to lend it?" Jody demanded.

"I'll give you a smarting backside if you don't lend it!" Henry had popped up behind them, making Contrition jump half a foot. "Fetch it."

"It isn't fair, I ought to be paid!" Jody insisted, his lower lip thrust out and his eyebrows meeting as he scowled.

"Who said anything about fair?" Henry's hand was already grasping Jody's collar, and he propelled the unwilling lad along. "We don't want an ignoramus in our midst, do we?"

"I am not an ignoramus!" said Contrition. "I know a lot. I know how to hitch up a wagon and drive a team, and how to shoot and snare, besides all the things women have to know, like cooking and spinning and weaving. I know a deal!"

"None of which will do you any good at all in Albany. You have, as you yourself would put it, a mort to learn if you are to achieve your ambition. Not that achieving it will bring you the satisfaction you think it will. Revenge is an empty vessel, in the end," Jonathan told her.

"That's all you know. I'll take a mort of . . . I'll take real satisfaction in revenge!"

Henry was back with the slate and a slate pencil, without Jody.

"Turning a sow's ear into a silk purse not only takes time, but supernatural powers," he said, grinning at Contrition. "But we'll do the best we can with what we have to work with. Maybe in a year or two, you'll have learned enough to know how to enter a parlor and how to hold a teacup and a few other things you'll need to know unless you want to go back to being a farmhussy for the rest of your life."

"I'll learn everything I need to learn. But if I couldn't, which I can and I will, I could be an actress. I wouldn't have to be a farmhussy."

Henry laughed. "You'll have to be an actress in any case, if you're to have any chance of success in Albany. You'll have to be one of the greatest actresses the world has ever known! Also, you'll have to do considerable growing up, but that at least will give you time to learn all you will need to know."

"I don't need to do any growing up! I'm grown-up already! I don't intend to be an old woman before I do what I'm going to do! I have a life to get on with, once I've brought my father to ruin."

"Do you consider that you have no life to get on with until after you've taken your ill-considered revenge? What about your day-to-day life until then, doesn't that count?" Henry asked.

"No, it doesn't. I'll start living my real life, whatever it might be, after I've brought my father to ruin. Nothing up to then matters."

"Then you'd better start learning. I'm not sure that I like being in the constant company of someone who hasn't been born yet," Henry said. "It's unsettling."

"Mr. Davenport, leave us," Jonathan requested, his tone making it an order. "We need no interruptions or distractions in the classroom."

Before an hour had passed, Jonathan was more than satisfied with Contrition's ability to learn. She was, as he would have put it, a quick study. And when she had mastered the entire alphabet in one morning, not only to recite it without error but to draw out the letters, he was convinced that her education would progress at a great rate.

Puck, Jonathan thought. He'd start teaching her the lines at the earliest opportunity. It was a pity about Ariel, but her Puck would be a triumph! With him as her mentor, there was no telling how far she might go. A real actress for the troupe! Well satisfied with his first day's accomplishment, he retired to refresh himself from his labors by taking a nap. Tomorrow Contrition, or Dianna, as she must be called now, would start spelling out simple words. She'd learn to read and write more quickly than any other pupil the world had ever known. Only, he admitted to himself as his due, because besides the advantage of her quick mind, she had him as her tutor!

Contrition had never known that there were so many villages and towns in the whole of the world, much less in the state of New York.

Syracuse treated the roving band of thespians better than had Auburn. Situated on the Erie Canal, there was no lack of patronage for anything that would provide an evening of amusement. In Syracuse, the Olympians were fortunate enough to be able to pay rental for the Masonic Hall, together with the fee for lighting..

Anton hoped that they would be able to play for at least three evenings. Any stand of less than two evenings was financially unfeasible. Another highfaluting word, Contrition thought, putting it in the bin in the corner of her brain that she reserved for new words. Once again she watched the performance from the wings, one of them a short comedy that Henry had written.

"Comedies are better," she remarked with conviction. "Leastwise a body knows what's going on, the players don't talk so dumb."

"Comedies are for plebians," Mr. Yeats instructed her. "True drama, the works of the Great Bard, are for the elite." Two more words for her word bin, most satisfactory words. At this rate, Contrition would be able to talk like an educated woman in no time at all, maybe so educated that most people wouldn't be able to understand her any more than she'd been able to understand the Olympians when she'd first come into contact with them.

The hall was well filled on the first evening, and the two shillings for pit and the one shilling for gallery brought in enough so that the troupe indulged itself by staying overnight at the Syracuse House, an

experience that filled Contrition with awe. How had she managed to live for seventeen years without knowing that such luxury existed?

The establishment being famous for its ale, both Anton and Gavin were the worse for wear in the morning, and Contrition was scarcely in better fettle, the strangeness of the experience having kept her awake until nearly dawn. Being an actress would be a wonderful thing if this happened very often! Maybe she'd learn to be an actress, the way Mr. Yeats wanted her to, just so that after she'd brought her father to ruin she could come back to this life of glamour. How the audience had applauded for Evangeline tonight, and for Carlotta! She pictured herself in Evangeline's place and finally fell asleep with the sound of wildly clapping hands in her ears.

Breakfast was a repast that stunned her. There was enough food for just this one meal to nourish the troupe for three days. Pancakes with butter and syrup, fried ham and fried eggs, fried potatoes and fried steak, biscuits dripping with butter and honey and preserves, pie and coffee and cheese. Contrition ate until her stomach felt as tight as a drum and watched with disbelief as the others packed in still more after she would have sworn that one more mouthful would make them burst. Lethargic both from her lack of sleep and from her breakfast, she was loath to settle down for another lesson in reading and writing when Jonathan insisted.

The lesson was given in the room she shared with Evangeline and Carlotta, the two actresses having ventured out to take in the delights of the town. With the door ajar to preserve propriety, Contrition learned to write her name and started to learn how to combine letters into recognizable syllables. Not satisfied with such mundane things, Jonathan went on to instruct her in how to walk, how to sit down in a chair and rise from it—whoever would have thought that a body would have to learn that—and how to enunciate a few lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with herself playing the part of Robin Goodfellow, or Puck. This last met with indifferent success, as she was prone to bursting out laughing at the ridiculous things she had to say, just as if they made sense. Still, Jonathan didn't despair. Perhaps Contrition would never be the great actress he had envisioned, but she had wit and charm and he could still make something of her.

They played twice more in Syracuse, and then there were slimmer pickings. A hamlet, a farmer's barn, a one-night stand at a tavern, another in an open meadow at a crossroads where they took in twelve shillings plus two jugs of hard cider, a length of homespun, a chicken, and a bag of flax that they could sell or trade. Elmer did well for them in Utica—another hall—and in the meantime Contrition eked out their larder by squirrel hunting and snaring rabbits.

In Rome, their luck changed for the better. A large and prosperous inn, huge beds, so big that three more girls the size of Contrition and Vangie and Lotta could have slept in theirs, and so much food that Contrition was hard put to believe it. She couldn't decide whether the rooms or the meals that she didn't have to cook or clean up after were the most glamorous. She decided on the meals—you could sleep anywhere, but having food served to you with no dishes to wash afterwards was luxury to surpass the wildest imagination.

They played for four nights in Rome, the last to a house so sparse that there was no question of trying for five. Still, it had been profitable.

In Utica they found the first posting of a reward for Contrition's return to her stepfather. Elmer Tibbs was waiting on the road to waylay them and warn them before they pulled into town.

Filled with more curiosity than apprehension, Contrition asked how large a reward Amos was offering.

"It isn't a penny and a bucket of ashes," Elmer said, his face so perturbed that her heart sank and Dolly gasped with dismay. One penny and a bucket of ashes, Contrition had learned, was the same as the offerer saying that he wanted nothing more to do with the runaway, whose value was measured by the ridiculous offer.

"How much, then?" Contrition had to know just how badly Amos wanted her back.

"Five dollars."

Five dollars! It was a fortune! Amos's desire for revenge against the girl who had had the temerity to deny him her labor must equal her own desire for revenge against Gerald Haywood!

"You're a valuable property. Maybe we ought to turn you in for the reward," Henry remarked, eyeing her speculatively.

"You wouldn't!" Contrition gasped.

"Not this time, at any rate. We're fairly affluent at the moment, but you'd better watch your step if we have a bad stand or two."

"Henry, stop teasing Dianna! You wouldn't turn her in any more than any of the rest of us would and you know it! Dianna, don't look so scared. You're safe with us, but Elmer's right. You'd better keep out of sight."

"We can't leave her alone at the campsite," Henry pointed out.
"What if some puke came along and found her?"

"I'll hide in the woods, then," Contrition said. "How did Amos describe me, Mr. Tibbs? Good enough so's someone might recognize me?"

"He said long black hair and blue eyes, seventeen years of age and slightly built. A good enough description except for the hair, although I wouldn't have thought you to be more than twelve."

"We dassn't leave her alone and unprotected, and we dassn't let her be seen in town." Dolly's brows were knit as she tried to think of a way out of the dilemma. "And we can't just move on; we have to play tomorrow night. We've been promised at the inn, and we need to take in as much money as we can while luck is in our favor. Besides, if she's posted in Utica, she's probably posted in every other town around here."

Henry's eyes were more speculative than ever. "The best place to hide her is in plain sight, because nobody will be looking for her there."

"Whatever do you have in mind, Henry?"

"We'll hide her on the stage," Henry said. "We'll change our offering and give the good people of Utica *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Behold Puck, of the open mouth and round eyes!"

"You're daft!" Contrition gasped. "I've never been on a stage in my life, and Mr. Yeats has only taught me a few of the lines!"

"A few is better than none, it gives us a starting place. You can learn enough others to fake it with enough prompting."

"It's madness, pure madness!" Evangeline protested. Vangie was more than a little perturbed to learn that the waif she hadn't wanted the Olympians to take in in the first place wasn't a child at all, but a young woman of seventeen! The sly puss, passing herself off as a twelve-year-old all this time! "She can't do it! She'd ruin the

performance and we'd be pelted out of town! To say nothing of the risk! If she's recognized, there's no telling what the consequences would be!"

"If we're pelted out of town, we can at least gather up the vegetables and eat 'em!" Henry said, grinning. Evangeline's face flamed with mortification and her nostrils flared, but Henry only grinned more widely.

"Nobody will recognize her! I'll costume her so nobody will guess that she isn't really a boy!" Lotta's face was bright and her eyes were shining. "She can do it, I just know she can! Mr. Yeats says she's a quick study. Oh, Mr. Davenport, I think it's just a wonderful idea!"

"That's because you're incurably stupid!" Vangie snapped.

"It's an asinine idea!" Gavin backed up the La Lune. "Even for Henry, it's an asinine idea!"

"We'll cut Puck's lines to the bone. She won't have much to learn," Jonathan declared. "I believe we can carry it off, I do believe we can! And once our Dianna is established as Puck, who would think to inquire if she might not after all be a young female?"

"Do you mean you want me to pretend to be a boy, even when I'm not onstage?" Contrition demanded, her voice quivering with indignation.

"I would deem it advisable, at least until Mr. Reeves gives up his search." Jonathan spoke gravely, his concern for this recently acquired waif soon-to-be actress very real. Contrition had come to be the daughter he had never had. He might have had a daughter. There had been a young lady once, but she had agreed with her parents that any man who chose to waste his life as an actor was no better than a wastrel, and his proposal of marriage had been scorned.

Eighteen years after his heart had been broken, Jonathan had glimpsed his Lucinda in an audience with a young man and a young lady on either side of her and the upright gentleman she had married sitting beside his son. The daughter must have been about the age Contrition was now, and although there was no physical resemblance, still it would have been nice to have a daughter.

"I won't do it!" Evangeline declared. "I won't play with a rank amateur who doesn't even know her lines!"

"Miss La Lune, think of the challenge it will offer you! If I hadn't been convinced that you could carry off a part in the face of such an obstacle, I wouldn't have offered the suggestion." Henry kept his face perfectly straight. "Think of the disservice you would be doing Utica if you were to deprive its citizens of your incomparable Hermia! No one can play Hermia as you do! You owe it to the uncultured masses to let them witness, for once in their lives, the magic of an inspired performance!"

Oh, glory! Contrition thought. Nobody could swallow all that syrup, not even somebody as vain as Vangie. Not that she wanted to play Puck. Being on the stage at all was enough to throw her into a tizzy fit, but playing a person of the opposite gender was so fantastical that she'd as lief roll up her other dress and set out for Albany on foot, which had been her original intention before she'd been kidnapped by Mr. Henry Davenport and dragged off to be an actress. She could take care of herself, no matter if Henry and Dolly and all the rest of them thought she couldn't, and furthermore, she could do it without turning herself into a boy.

Her protests were cut short as Elmer Tibbs led them to a rent-free meadow where they set up camp under an oak tree, much to Evangeline's disgust. She, for one, was going to spend the night under a roof in the best accommodations Utica had to offer.

Lotta delved into the ever-present trunks for Puck's costume. "Isn't it a mercy that Mr. Tibbs is so small that it'll fit you with scarcely any alterations! And you'll be a much better Puck. Mr. Tibbs is so old, meaning no disrespect, and Puck was supposed to be young."

While Lotta tucked and basted, Mr. Yeats and Henry stood outside the Conniewagon feeding Contrition her lines. As if the costume weren't ridiculous enough, like something out of a fantastical dream, and indecent at that to Contrition's way of thinking, she was constrained to mouth such nincompoopery as "How, now, spirit, whither wander you?" and "Thou speaketh aright, I am that wanderer of the night."

"That's enough of that," Jonathan said. "We won't attempt the

rest of the passage. She'll have enough trouble remembering even the most abbreviated of lines."

"I won't even remember that much!"

"Don't worry, we'll prompt you."

"What hempen homespun have we swaggering here, So near the cradle of the fairy queen?" Contrition recited, adding a fervent "ouch!" as Lotta's needle jabbed her in a most vulnerable spot.

"I took him sleeping . . . that is finished too, and the Athenian woman by his side," Henry coached her.

"That isn't decent. I won't say it!"

"Heaven have patience! Just say it, Dianna, don't think about what it might mean!"

"I won't and you can't make me!"

"Children, children, to work! We have no time for petty bickering. Say the line, Dianna. It isn't indecent, it's the way people talked and behaved in olden days," Jonathan cajoled her.

"If you say so." Contrition was mollified a little, even if she wasn't convinced.

"If you forget a line, just scamper around in a comical manner and make funny faces," Henry advised her. "Lotta, are you finished with the costume yet?"

"Almost. Give me another ten minutes. Go on, Dianna, say it."

"I took him sleeping . . . that is finished too, and the Athenian woman by his side," Contrition recited. "Tarnation, Lotta, I can't wear this costume in public! It shows more of me than it covers!"

"That's because you're a fairy. It's all right for a fairy," Lotta explained. "Besides, everyone will think you're a boy, so it'll be all right."

"Then you'd better do something about the top! Loosen it up some more. Mr. Tibbs didn't have anything to put in it and I do!"

All the rest of the afternoon and even while they were eating a makeshift meal scraped together from what Elmer had scrounged from the shops, the rehearsal went on. Contrition's head swam and she was convinced that once she set foot on the stage, every word she'd learned would fly right out of her head and she'd make an unmitigated fool of herself. "Unmitigated" was another good word.

"Don't worry about it, you have another whole day to learn your

lines," Henry told her. "And after that, I'll work you into a burletta or two, easy parts that won't be any trouble at all to learn."

"As boys?"

"You'll be a most prepossessing boy! With that hair and your lack of, ah, stature, no one would dream that you aren't a boy. Certainly, a boy. Or would you rather go back to Amos Reeves's farm?"

Contrition hated him.

After the relentless coaching, Contrition thought she just might be able to do it, but once she took her place on the improvised stage, she realized that she'd never known how many people could congregate in one place just to stare at her. She stood frozen for a moment until a sharp hiss reminded her that she had to say something, and the words came out of her mouth all wrong.

"Now, spirit, where wanders you?" Well, "whither" was a silly word anyway, nobody said "whither." Why couldn't characters in plays talk plain English? The state of her undress was of more concern to her. She felt as though she were stark naked, and she was convinced that every soul in the audience knew that she was a girl and not what she was supposed to be.

The rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seemed to take an eternity and then an eon beyond. She was poked in the ribs, hissed at, kicked in the shins, and pinched whenever she faltered. But somehow the lines got out, and when the promptings failed, she remembered to cavort around looking like a silly ass, as though she had only that morning escaped from a loony bin.

Eventually the skipping and hopping and cavorting got to her and she commenced to enjoy it. The audience was laughing; they liked it! The fact that the audience was laughing at her rather than with her escaped her notice because she didn't have the experience to know the difference.

It was over at last. The cast lined up to take its bows and the scattered applause went right to her head. She was an actress, she, Contrition Reeves who should have been Contrition Haywood, was a bona fide actress! "Bona fide" was a good word, she thought, when Mr. Yeats whispered it to her. Evangeline was glaring at her as if she

wished that looks could kill, but that didn't matter, Mr. Yeats was the one who knew more than all the rest of them put together.

In the confusion of faces in the audience, she hadn't separated one from another. There were more men than women, but that was always the case and only to be expected. But now, with the ordeal ended, Contrition noticed one portly, middle-aged gentleman, with a florid face and thinning hair, who seemed to single her out for his applause. Her spirits soared. He'd liked her, for certain sure! He'd liked her a lot, else why would he be clapping so hard?

Her surmise was confirmed when the gentleman offered to regale the entire troupe with a late repast.

"An admirer!" Evangeline breathed, her eyes brightening. "Even you weren't quite able to ruin my performance, Dianna. Henry was right, I can surpass any difficulty!" Preening, she fussed with her elaborate hairstyle and her costume. "We mustn't keep the gentleman waiting. If he's well acquainted and affluent enough, he might even give me a testimonial after our next performance!"

"What's a testimonial?" Contrition asked.

"You're so ignorant! Come along, I haven't time to explain now. Although I don't doubt that the gentleman wouldn't miss you if you didn't appear at all, if you'd rather go back to the campground, as weary as you must be from your effort to destroy this troupe!"

"I'm never tired, and I'm all-fired hungry. I could eat my share of a raw horse," Contrition informed her. "I never knew that acting was such hungry work."

The gentleman was indeed affluent, they discovered, when he commanded a private parlor at the inn, and the finest of roast beef and fowl were placed before them and anything they chose to drink was forthcoming. More and more food and drink were urged on them by the gentleman who appreciated the finer things in life, such as the art of the theatre. The gentleman was lavish in his praise of the ladies' beauty, of the gentlemen's performance, of the talents of the entire troupe.

"And our little Puck, a delightful performance, a most refreshing performance!" said the gentleman, one Mr. Cyrus Barlowe, the owner of Utica's largest mercantile store.

Contrition reached for another slice of roast beef. She'd been

raised on chicken—it wasn't any treat to her—but roast beef was something else again and she meant to eat her fill. She was only sorry that Henry wasn't with them; he would've been downright amused by Mr. Barlowe's toploftical manner. Come to think of it, Henry never did eat with them when they ate in a public house. There was something more than passing strange about that, and she meant to ask him about it the first chance she had.

Their benefactor's face, florid enough to begin with, had become even more flushed, and he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, using its snowy folds delicately.

"I declare that I must have overimbibed in my enthusiasm for the moment!" he declared. "A breath of fresh air is what I need. No, no, don't stint yourselves, it's merely a token of my appreciation for the pleasure you've given me this evening. Perhaps our young Puck would accompany me to the innyard until I have recovered myself a little."

Evangeline looked piqued but only for a moment. If the gentleman were about to be sick, of course he wouldn't want her, the beautiful La Lune, to witness it! It was natural that he should ask someone he thought to be a milkling to support him until his head cleared.

"Your arm, please," Mr. Barlowe said once he and Contrition had stepped outside. "We'll walk as far as the stables. 'Twill clear my head."

For a man who wasn't feeling well, Mr. Cyrus Barlowe's step was oddly steady, and the pressure of his hand on her arm was strong. Contrition kept pace with him, watchful if he should stagger, but he didn't. And now his hand was running up and down her arm in the strangest fashion.

They reached the shadows of the stables, and the gentleman suggested that they step inside. "A pile of fresh straw would make an admirable resting place," he said.

Contrition allowed that it would. If the gentleman wanted to take a nap in the hayloft, it was fine with her; she'd go back to the inn and have some more roast beef.

"Do you think you can climb the ladder?" she asked.

"I can try. Just come along behind me in case I teeter."

The ladder to the hayloft was negotiated without incident. The gentleman eased himself down in the hay. As he had caught her hand before he began easing himself, Contrition was drawn down with him. And now his hands were behaving in a most extraordinary manner.

"What in tunket are you doing?" she demanded, trying to draw away.

"Come now, don't act the innocent! A lad like you, such a beautiful lad, and with your profession, is no stranger to this, surely. Give me a kiss, pretty fellow."

"Are you daft? I'll do no such thing! Leave go of me!"

"A kiss, a kiss!" For such a middle-aged gentleman, he was certainly strong. Contrition gasped as his mouth came down over hers in a slobbering kiss, and then she began to kick out at him with her feet and pummel him with her fists as his hands did something altogether unreasonable, feeling along the silly costume she was wearing until one of them came to rest directly on her crotch.

"What in tarnation are you about?" Contrition yelped.

"You're a girl!" the gentleman yelped in turn.

"Of course I'm a girl! What in tunket did you think?"

"Ohmigod!" Mr. Cyrus Barlowe moaned. Perspiration dripped from his forehead in rivulets. "A female!" Contrition's mouth being wide open in preparation to letting out a screech that would be heard the width and breadth of Utica, he made haste to clamp his hand over it.

"Be quiet, don't raise a fuss! I'll be ruined, ruined! My wife might hear of it, it might come to my associates' ears! Here, take this, and this . . ."

Money was being pressed into her hands, bills and coins, while Contrition gasped with bewildered amazement. "You've not been harmed, just button your mouth! Do you want me driven from town in disgrace?"

"I think you're as crazy as a bedbug!" Contrition yelped. "I don't want your consarned money . . ."

But she was talking to thin air; Mr. Cyrus Barlowe had already scrambled down the ladder with astonishing speed for a man of his bulk. "Tell our host that I'll stop by and settle with him tomorrow,

tell him that I had to go home because I'm indisposed! He knows me, he won't raise a fuss. And not a word, not a word!"

"Crazy as a bedbug!" Contrition yelled after him. Not knowing what else to do, she climbed down from the hayloft herself, having to negotiate it with one hand because the other was filled with money. She began walking back toward the inn and yelped again as a shadow loomed up in front of her.

"What the devil's going on? I just saw your benefactor hightailing it as if the devil were at his heels! And I thought I heard someone crying out."

It was Henry, and although Contrition couldn't make out too much of his expression in the darkness, his voice was filled with concern.

"I don't know what's going on! He said he was sick, and he asked me to come with him to get some air, and the next thing I knew we were in the hayloft and his hands were all over me where they had no consarned business being, and he yelped out that I was a girl. Then he said for me to keep my mouth buttoned because he'd be ruint, and he stuck all this money in my hands and skedaddled."

She held out the money. Henry whistled between his teeth.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Contrition asked. "I don't even know where to find him so I can give it back."

"Keep it," Henry advised her. "The damned bas—" He broke off. "He deserves losing it. He's damned lucky that I didn't come along a little sooner or I'd have broken his neck!"

"But what's it all about?" Contrition demanded.

"Ask Dolly to explain it to you." If Contrition hadn't known better, she would have thought that he was blushing. "Keep the money, only don't go climbing into haylofts with any other man or you'll get a reputation for yourself that you won't want. The money can be the beginnings of your savings toward reaching your goal. You can't descend on Albany and your father penniless."

"I don't understand any of this!" Contrition said, exasperated.

Henry patted her head. "Of course you don't, you're only an innocent child. Dolly will tell you all you need to know so that you can be on your guard if anything like this ever happens again."

Reluctantly, Henry left her. She'd be safe enough now, the skunk who'd enticed her to the hayloft wouldn't show his face near the inn

until the troupe was well out of town. Henry was only sorry that he had neither the time nor the opportunity to go looking for him, to give him a taste of what he deserved.

But the last thing Henry could afford was a whoobub. There might be witnesses, and he might be taken into custody for assaulting a prominent and respected citizen. And if he were taken into custody, he'd be recognized. And if he were recognized, it would be all up with him, seeing that that scalawag Leon Murdoch, his cousin whom Henry was beginning to wish had never been born, was still nowhere to be found. It was almost as if Leon had disappeared from the face of the earth. He knew that Leon was somewhere in Europe, but all efforts to locate him and apprise him of the necessity that he board the first ship and return home had been to no avail.

Thinking about it, Henry could almost feel the rough hempen noose around his neck. His mouth compressed, he strode off to keep his appointment, hoping against hope that this time there would be news. He couldn't go on hiding with the Olympians forever. His luck was sure to run out.

5

AT the very moment when Henry was imagining a hempen rope around his neck, his cousin Leon Murdoch was beating a hasty retreat from London, exhorting his hack driver to urge more speed from his horse.

It wasn't that London wasn't delightful, in spite of the dreary, gray rain that had fallen ever since his arrival for this, his second visit to the city. Leon didn't even mind the coal smoke that mingled with the fog of chilly mornings and evenings, creating a near-lethal mixture so noxious that even native Londoners complained about it. It was

the London nightlife that he was interested in, and the pursuit of the opposite gender.

Leon had always been the scapegrace of the family, the black sheep, the one whom the older, more staid members of the clan shook their heads over, prophesying that he would come to no good end. "Born to be hung" was one of their favorite phrases, uttered most frequently by Henry's father and, with only slightly less frequency, by his own.

The younger women of the Murdoch-Cunningham clan dreamed of finding a young man exactly like him, except that instead of strewing his favors, Leon would shower his favors only on them.

Leon was also Henry's favorite relative. They had lived in each other's pockets all of their lives, their homes being only a block apart on Maple Street, a fact that Henry's father often deplored because of Leon's detrimental influence on his son and heir. Ezekiel Cunningham, Henry's father, was a judge, and Leon's father, who was Henry's mother's brother, had various profitable enterprises, including a mercantile store and interests in a shipping company that imported goods from the far corners of the earth.

But Leon had had one advantage that Henry had lacked. Leon's great-aunt on his mother's side had been almost as much of a scapegrace and scandal in her day as Leon was now, a notorious beauty and an even more notorious flirt. Her escapes from outright disgrace had been narrow. A woman of lesser connections would have been branded immoral and publicly shunned. Needless to say, Leon had adored her and she had adored him.

Hester Murdoch, to Leon's shattering grief, had passed on to her reward in September of the previous year, three months after Leon's twenty-first birthday, at the untimely age of ninety-four. Having inherited a fortune from her husband and added to it by judicious investments, the old lady had made Leon her sole heir, stating unequivocally, if unconventionally, in her last will and testament that if she left it to more conservative members of her family, they would get no joy of it but only let it molder at interest. The personal letter, handed to Leon at the reading of the will and for his eyes alone, had advised him to take the money and "burn up the world with it whilst

you're young enough to enjoy it, and let the ashes fall where they may."

In deference to his great-aunt's wishes, Leon had set about doing that exact thing. For all of his life, he had been kept on a tight rein by his father and his family, kept short of funds to curtail his amusements, kept at his books, kept at dreary days in his father's office, the Murdochs hoping that sufficient discipline would eventually mold him into the pattern expected of a Murdoch.

Lack of funds and lack of time had inhibited Leon's activities a little, but not a great deal, because Leon was good at improvising. But with Hester's money and Hester's admonition to use it in the pursuit of pleasure, all restraints were removed from him. He was of age, the money was his with no strings attached, and there was nobody with the power to stop him.

He'd see the world. He had an itching desire to compare the young ladies of England, of France, of Italy and Spain and Greece, with American young ladies and with each other, determined to learn for himself which were the more desirable. Comparison of vintages and of gambling games also attracted him. The sky was the limit and he was off and flying. He was only sorry that Henry was unable to fly with him.

"Come on, old fellow, I'll foot all the bills, you won't be a penny out of pocket!" Leon had cajoled Henry as he had laid his plans for the Grand Tour sans any kind of chaperone.

"But that would be a year or two years, or however long you intend to go junketing around the world, out of my own chosen career," Henry had told him. "And as enticing as your offer is, I can't afford it. Besides, you'll undoubtedly end up in some European prison for the rest of your life, unless you offend the authorities to such a degree that they hang you, and they'd probably hang me right beside you. As much as I cherish your company, I prefer to remain out of jail and with my head intact on my shoulders."

"Spoilsport! Well, at least we'll have one bash to remember all our lives before I set sail. Leave everything to me. We have to celebrate my good fortune, don't we?"

That much, at least, Henry was willing to do. He needed a good bash to console him for missing the rest of it. He was so tempted to go with Leon that he could taste it. Unfortunately, or fortunately as the

case might be, Henry was possessed of a small streak of conservatism that Leon utterly lacked. Life was real and life was earnest, and while pleasure was greatly to be desired, there was a living to be made, a career to be pursued. He himself would inherit a not-inconsiderable fortune on his father's demise, which he hoped wouldn't be for another fifty or sixty years, but he had a sneaking inner conviction that he ought to do something to deserve it.

The bash was, as Leon had promised, a bash to end all bashes. It started in Schenectady, went on to Albany, and ended up in New York City, from whence Leon was to set sail for England. By that time, both Henry's head and his constitution were much the worse for wear.

There was no lack of entertainment in New York. He and Leon had a few acquaintances there, and they were wined and dined and regaled, everyone wanting to congratulate Leon on his good fortune and wish him godspeed.

The wining and dining and regaling affected Leon considerably less than it did Henry. Leon, like his great-aunt Hester, had inherited a head for spirits, which Henry had not. Two weeks of dissipation scarcely showed on Leon while Henry was at the point of collapse. Which he did, having no memory whatsoever of the last hours of the bash before Leon sailed.

His only memory was of being in a hotel dining room, at a party that was even larger and more noisy than the parties that had gone before. There was a young lady, or perhaps not all that young. She was pretty, in any case, and not in the least averse to Henry's attentions. Judge Cunningham would have said she was no better than she should have been. But Judge Cunningham was not at the party, and being unable to associate with remarkably attractive young ladies who were no better than they should have been, in Schenectady, Henry was determined to make the most of it while the opportunity was at hand.

He had a vague recollection of leaving the hotel with her. He had a vague recollection of her name, Miss Flora Baldwin, and that her hair was an unlikely shade of red. But after that, there was nothing.

Nothing, that is, until he woke up in a stable with Leon slapping

his face and instructing a stable lad, the only other person in evidence, to bring another bucket of water with which Henry's head was to be doused.

"Come out of it, Henry. The party's over. You've been unconscious for hours, it's coming on toward dawn, and I can't go on nursemaiding you, I have a ship to board. I couldn't even get you back to our lodgings, damnit. You weigh a ton and besides, you were about to throw up all over me, so I got you as far as the stable and caught a wink or two of sleep myself. The horse and gig are yours, no, don't go shaking your head at me, I have a right to give my favorite cousin a present."

The horse and gig were the first things Leon had bought with his bonanza, a horse and gig that made the eyes of Schenectady pop out and the hearts of all of Schenectady's young Corinthians burn with envy. Henry had argued with Leon about it; such an expenditure, when he was about to sail for England, was the height of foolishness even for a young man as wealthy as Leon was now. And now he wanted Henry to have them! It was too much. In Henry's dazed state, he couldn't take it in.

"I'll buy another rig when I come home, provided I have enough money left. You and I can have some crackerjack races. We'll have all the girls fighting over us."

"Don't be an ass. Even you couldn't spend all your money, no matter how long you stay abroad."

"I can make a darned good try at it! Open your eyes, damnit. We have to pick up our luggage at the hotel."

Henry groaned. "If I move I'll be sick."

"All right, stay here then. I'll take Nat here with me and he'll bring your luggage back. You can start out for home as soon as you can see straight. One good thing, all that fresh air between here and Schenectady will clear your head." Leon thrust a wad of bills into Henry's hand. "This ought to cover your expenses till you get there."

Henry was already asleep again. When he opened his eyes three-quarters of an hour later, they focused. Leon was gone, his valise was at his feet, and he had to get on home.

He ought to have some breakfast before he started out, but the

thought of food made his stomach flinch, so he settled for dunking his head in the water bucket and brushing the straw off his clothing while young Nat hitched up for him. Nobody else was around; the sky was just now beginning to lighten with the promise of dawn. Belatedly, he remembered to thrust a bill, the denomination of which escaped him, into Nat's hand for his trouble. He should have looked at the bill because Nat was stunned speechless, but it would be unkind to take it back and substitute a smaller one.

He set an easy pace on his first stage of his journey home, letting the trotter pick its own speed simply because he was in no condition to urge it on. His stomach was uneasy and his eyes had a deplorable tendency to see two trees by the wayside where there was only one. Leon, blast his hide, would be leaning on the ship's railing at this very moment, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, evaluating all of the young ladies aboard ship and mapping out his campaign to win every one of them. And what did Henry have to look forward to? Days of poring over dusty tomes of law, evenings discussing the more obscure points with his father, while Leon wined and dined and danced and flirted on the high seas. For a brief, shameful moment, Henry hoped that the ship would sink.

Late in the afternoon he pulled in at an inn. He needed coffee, he needed food. Even more important, the trotter needed a rest.

The common room of the inn was abuzz when he entered it. Looking at the plate of steak and eggs he'd ordered and telling himself that he'd eat it if it killed him, he at first paid no attention to the talk that was going forward with a great deal of excitement and shaking of heads.

He poked at the steak, cut off an extremely small portion, transported it to his mouth, opened his mouth much against his mouth's will, and deposited the steak within. His stomach turned over but he went on chewing. Never again, he thought. If I live through this, I swear I'll never touch another drop as long as I live! It isn't worth it. Ohmigod, I'm going to be sick!

The word "murder" drifted toward him and made its final resting place in his right ear, uttered by the gentleman who was sitting beside him. It was followed by more words, nestling atop the first.

"Young society scamp, what else could be expected? Got away clean, he did, but his name's known. He'll be apprehended, never fear, and all his family's money and influence won't keep his neck out of a noose. Murder's murder!"

Henry's ears pricked up. Murder? Who, when, where? He cut off another piece of steak and transported it to his mouth, chewing doggedly. The first bite had stayed down. If this second bite stayed down, maybe he'd be all right. He couldn't guarantee it but it was a possibility.

"Son of a judge, no less! A prominent judge in Schenectady, an old family, money, respect. He did it, all right. He was seen. There's two witnesses to swear they saw him coming out of the house directly after it happened."

The bite of steak stuck in Henry's throat and nearly choked him. At the same time, he didn't dare to choke for fear of drawing attention to himself.

"Been to a party, he had. Got drunk as a lord, and then ended up killing the young lady he escorted home. No doubt he made advances and she rebuffed him, and he struck her with his cane. A unique-looking cane, it couldn't be mistaken; it was found right beside her. The young lady's maid found it when she heard loud voices and then a thump and came downstairs to investigate. The murderer was gone but her mistress was lying on the floor with her head bashed in and the murder instrument beside her. A cane with a gargoyle head, silver."

Murder. Judge. Schenectady. Cane. Where was the cane Leon had insisted on buying him? Not the whippity stick that Leon had wanted to buy him, a slender, useless ornament that Corinthians were fond of carrying, but a good, solid, no-nonsense cane. As long as Leon had been determined to buy him a cane, Henry had chosen one that he had meant to give to his father, thinking that the judge would be amused by the whimsical gargoyle. Why hadn't he settled for the beribboned whippity stick?

The gentleman at his right, who had just arrived by a stage that had made better time than Henry had, was talking about him. And Leon, who could have provided him with an alibi, was somewhere on the high seas, and there was no telling how long it would take to

get in touch with him and get him back so that he could testify that Henry hadn't done it. What was it Leon had told him? Yes, yes, that was it, Leon had left the party with another young lady minutes after Henry and his young lady had left, and Leon had found him less than a block from the hotel, passed out cold on the cobblestones and no young lady in evidence. Leon had dismissed his young lady, smoothing her ruffled feelings by giving her a considerable sum of money, and had attempted to get Henry back to their hotel, failed, and settled for getting him to the stable, which was a good deal closer. And Leon had stayed with him. Good, loyal Leon, taking care of the cousin he had made a boyhood vow to be loyal to, when they'd been no more than eight and seven respectively, their oaths sealed in blood.

The young lady Leon had been with; she'd be able to testify for him! But try as he might, Henry couldn't come up with her name or even a description; his mind was blank.

The stable lad, then! Young . . . Henry paled. The stable lad's name eluded him, and worse, the whereabouts of the stable was equally elusive. He hadn't the faintest idea where it was or the name of its proprietor. Leon had taken care of such mundane details.

Dazed, scarcely able to believe it, Henry decided that he had better make tracks. This time, aching head and queasy stomach notwithstanding, he urged the trotter to its fastest pace, in order to get well ahead of the news which was already spreading as fast as hooves and wheels could carry it.

What was the name of the hotel where the party had taken place? Henry couldn't remember. What street had it been on? Henry couldn't remember. Henry, to his dismay, could remember nothing at all that would help him establish his innocence.

Two witnesses had allegedly seen him leave the scene of the crime. No telling how many witnesses would remember that he had left the party with the murdered young lady. The murder weapon, his own cane, beside the murdered young lady.

Henry was in trouble. Even the judge wouldn't be able to help him until Leon returned. Henry had to find a place to hide, to keep out of sight, until he could contact his father, assure the judge that

he was innocent, and let the judge advise him. He could not go home; to go home would be to be taken into immediate custody.

He was so immersed in his dark and roiling thoughts that he nearly missed seeing the banner that was posted in front of an inn three villages down the road. A year before, when he'd been a stripling of nineteen with leanings toward the literary, Henry had composed three short plays. He'd thought that they were earth-shatteringly good.

Shyly but confidently, he'd shown the playlets to his father, who was the most intelligent man he knew and who would surely appreciate the fact that his only son was a budding world-famous master playwright. His father had read through all three of the playlets without comment, while Henry had fidgeted, trying not to fidget.

"Utter trash," his father had said. "An abysmal waste of time. If this is all you can find to do for your amusement, I suggest that you put in two or three more hours a day reading law."

Crushed, Henry had turned to Leon for comfort.

"What does he know?" Leon had comforted him. "They're good, Henry. Well, they're at least passable. He isn't a literary critic, he's a judge. What you need is someone who knows about plays. I have it! The next time a troupe of traveling thespians comes to Schenectady, show it to them. They'll know whether your plays are any good or not."

Clinging to his hopes, Henry had followed Leon's advice. The next time a troupe of traveling thespians had come to Schenectady, he had sought them out, presented himself to the owner-manager, and asked for an opinion.

Anton Burnside had accepted Henry's manuscripts but had frowned when Henry had asked him to pass judgment on them.

"I'd like to accommodate you, sir, but I have little time for such matters. I'll try to scan them before we leave Schenectady, but I can make no promises."

"If I were to offer a small remuneration for your time?"

That was a different matter entirely. Any remuneration, no matter how small, was welcome. Anton Burnside had accepted the five dollars Henry tendered him, and had accepted custody of the plays.

The troupe was called the Olympians. As troupes go, it wasn't one of the best, but it was the best that was at hand. That evening after Henry had witnessed their offering, enjoying it thoroughly, he had sought out Anton Burnside again and been given his verdict.

Mr. Burnside had been a man of his word. Having accepted the remuneration, he had read the playlets. He had found one of them passable, another almost passable, needing only a little work, and the third completely unpassable.

"Only passable, mind you. If I were you, I would look for some other means of making a living," Anton Burnside had told the aspiring young playwright. "However, with your permission, the Olympians might work the most passable playlet into our repertory. I cannot offer you any remuneration for it, as the playlet is yet to be proved."

Henry had been satisfied. To put it more explicitly, he had been elated. He was an author, his playlet was to be presented on stage!

Not in Schenectady, unfortunately, as disappointing as it was. Henry never did get to see his work presented behind the footlights. And in subsequent months, he had given up the idea of becoming a playwright. For one thing it was hard to find the time, and for another, he had come to agree with his father, that his work was trash.

It was a matter of merest chance that the Olympians should have crossed his path again at this particular moment in his life, when he was in such dire straits that he had no clear idea of which way to turn. But Henry's mind was agile. He was acquainted with the fact that it was fairly common for young men wishing the experience of appearing on a stage to pay a troupe for the privilege of walk-on parts as an amateur. Henry's pursuers would look for him in Schenectady. They would look for him in New York City. They would look for him at the homes of friends and acquaintances. They would not look for him, by the greatest stretch of the imagination, in a troupe of traveling thespians.

Luck was with him. The Olympians had not been doing well, their coffer was deplorably empty, the twenty-dollar fee that was the usual price for allowing a young gentleman to join them would be most welcome—a godsend, in fact.

And the Olympians were a godsend to Henry. It was Elmer Tibbs who took the horse and gig on his advance expeditions to find stands for performing, and who sold the horse and gig and paid over every penny to Henry, except for a five-dollar fee for acting as Henry's agent in the matter. It was Jonathan Yeats, assuming his most dignified, gentlemanly manner, who contacted Henry's father and passed over to the judge an unopened and unread letter stating the facts as Henry knew them and asking for advice.

The judge's reply was terse. Things could not be more desperate for Henry. Henry was to stay with the Olympians until Leon could be brought back, and Henry was by no means to attempt to contact his father in person.

The witnesses in New York City were standing by their story that they had seen Henry leave the murdered young lady's home. The hue and cry was on. The Cunninghams were disgraced; Faith Cunningham, Henry's mother, was devastated; Constance and Mary, Henry's older and younger sister, respectively, were beyond consoling; but most important, if Henry were to be taken, there was every chance that he would be hung before his innocence could be established. The very fact that he was from a wealthy and distinguished family would work against him. A drunken, hell-raising young Corinthian, the public opinion would be, and it was high time that such young men learned that they were as subject to the justice of the law as men of lesser privilege and means. The stories of the extended bash Leon had insisted on having before he sailed were already grist for the tabloids, with an outraged public eating them up, crying out for justice.

And so Henry became an integral part of the Olympians. He turned over the money from the sale of the horse and gig to them, ensuring their undivided loyalty even if they had known who he was. They didn't know, at least not for sure, and they didn't care to know. Henry was one of them, and they liked him, and as Dolly so succinctly put it, whatever Henry was hiding from, he hadn't done it. Besides, the Olympians were well acquainted with avoiding the law, owing to all the times Anton had advised them to eat heartily at breakfast, this being the cue that the troupe would depart an inn bag

and baggage and in considerable haste without paying the tab that had been chalked on the mirror.

On leaving the stable yard after having talked to Contrition about her shameful encounter with the gentleman who had mistaken her for a pretty boy, Henry's strides lengthened purposefully as he made for an abandoned shed on the outskirts of town. This assignation had been set up for some time, and the messenger he was to meet there might have been waiting for several days, the Olympians' schedule being so haphazard. Henry prayed that the messenger had not given up hope and left rather than waiting until the appointed time of eleven in the evening when risk of discovery would be at the minimum, all decent folk being long abed.

He was there. Eli Pratt, the judge's gardener, a man to whom the judge had given employment after he had served a jail sentence the judge himself had meted out. Eli was intensely grateful to the judge, and his loyalty was without question.

A man slightly more than middle-aged, a ne'er-do-well up until the time of his sentencing, Eli was put to work as a gardener and general handyman. Never having had steady employment before, Eli now had no lack of hard work to keep him out of trouble. But the judge also saw that Eli had better and more plentiful food than he'd ever had in his life, a decent room to call his own, and a stove to warm himself by in the winter. After forty years of living a precarious existence, cold and hungry more often than warm and fed, Eli held the judge, for all that the judge had sent him to jail, to be only one notch lower than God.

"Eli! Have you been waiting long?"

"Three days," Eli said, counting on his fingers. His face broke into a smile, because the counting was right, it had been three days. The judge had said to wait for no more than four days; four days could be accounted for by giving out that Eli had once again slipped from grace and gone on a drunk and slept it off in some barn loft before presenting himself, shame-faced and contrite, to his employer begging for one more chance.

"Is there any news? Anything at all?" asked Henry.

"The judge said to tell you, there ain't no news. The judge said to tell you, go on the way you are."

Henry's heart sank.

"I have to go home tomorrow. The judge said."

"Yes, yes, go on home. Tell my father that I'm all right."

"I'll tell him. I won't forget." That was questionable, Eli's memory not being the best owing to all the years he had eaten away at his brain with the cheapest alcohol. Still, he seldom forgot anything the judge charged him to remember. He didn't get drunk any more. The judge monitored every penny he earned and spent, and there was no way he could spend money for drink without the judge missing the money and demanding an accounting for it. On occasions such as this, when he slipped into a public house and bought a jug, to make the patrons of the public house think that he was falling from grace, he was obliged to take the jug to the judge's garden and secrete it, still full, where the judge would find it and check its contents. There was no such thing as watering the contents after he'd brought the level of the jug down, either, because the judge tested the contents with his own palate, which never made a mistake. Eli didn't resent the testing. Going without drink was better than going cold and hungry.

Henry watched Eli shamble off to whatever lodgings he'd procured for himself, and then he turned his own steps toward the campsite.

Damn Leon! Where the devil was he, anyway? He couldn't have disappeared from the face of the earth! The judge had sent word by Eli, on several other occasions, that news of Leon's passing through one city or another in England and in France and in Spain had got back to him. But not one of all the judge's urgent letters had caught up with the rascal, although they were to be forwarded in hopes of catching up with him.

Gritting his teeth, Henry imagined Leon at this moment, with a beautiful girl on his arm, strolling the streets of Paris, or Leon in the company of brilliant and amusing people, enjoying fine viands and finer wines at some country home or townhouse, living off the fat of the land, having the time of his life. Leon, without a care in the world.

Henry wasn't quite right about that last surmise. At the moment, Leon had one care in the world, and that was to quit London before the fathers and brothers of one Miss Violet Hyde-Smith could catch up with him.

Not that Leon had made improper advances to the lovely Miss Hyde-Smith, but he had discerned that Miss Hyde-Smith was becoming altogether too serious about him, so serious that she had apprised her father and her brothers that she was to become Mrs. Leon Murdoch and make her future home in America. A precipitate departure from London, and from England, was indicated.

Paris was nice. Leon was extremely fond of Paris. French ladies, and Parisian ladies in particular, were altogether more worldly than the innocent Miss Violet Hyde-Smith. They knew a harmless flirtation when they indulged in one. Yes, he would stay in Paris for a while, and after that he rather thought that he'd enjoy seeing Rome again.

The day after Leon crossed the channel, having made connections with the boat at the last possible moment, another of the judge's letters arrived at the London establishment where Leon had been staying. Unfortunately, the hotel had no idea where to forward the letter, Leon having been particular not to leave a forwarding address. Leon was always particular not to leave a forwarding address, as it had turned out that all of his departures from any city or country were precipitate, owing in every case to involvement with one young lady or another, all of whom were beautiful and charming but none of whom he cared to marry.

Legging it toward the Olympians' campsite at eleven-thirty of an upper New York State evening, Henry hoped savagely that Leon would lose all of his money gambling and have to return home.

Henry's wish was not to be granted. Leon was a scapegrace, Leon was a black sheep, Leon was born to be hung, but Leon was no fool. Of gambling he did little, and he always quit when he started to lose with any consistency. Indeed, his fortune remained remarkably intact, a good share of his living expenses being defrayed by being the guest of various well-born and well-fortuned people he met. Leon could, if he so desired, spend the rest of his life exactly as he

was spending it now, a life that he found remarkably satisfying, and never return home at all.

6

"WELL, I never!" Contrition's face was bright scarlet, and if it hadn't been Dolly who'd told her what their benefactor had been about when he'd enticed her into the hayloft, she wasn't sure that she'd believe it. Her face flushed even brighter as she reflected that it was no wonder that Henry had refused to tell her. "That reprehensible old lecher!" Contrition's vocabulary was improving at a great rate. A few weeks ago she'd have had to be content with calling the town's pillar of society a dirty old man.

"Talk about green!" Vangie said derisively. "I should think that a ten-year-old would have known better than to climb into a hayloft with a middle-aged man!"

"How was I to know?" Contrition defended herself. "I never heard tell of such a thing in all my born days! Men liking men or liking boys! It just ain't decent!"

Evangeline gave her a cool look. "Of course it isn't, but it crosses my mind that if more of it went on, there'd be fewer bastards in the world. If your natural father had taken a liking to his stableboy, for instance . . ."

"Vangie!" Dolly's voice was sharp. "That wasn't called for. It isn't Dianna's fault that she's a bastard, and it certainly wasn't her mother's fault that she was forced. You're a fine one to talk. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone!"

Evangeline stood up from where she had been brushing her long, golden hair in front of the portable mirror she always carried with her. She'd noticed, even in the candlelight in the room the girls were

sharing at the inn, that there were a few more gray hairs intertwined with the gold, which itself was becoming faded and tarnished, and she wasn't in the best of moods.

"Well, it's true. Dianna isn't too young to face a few facts."

"Vangie, you're being hateful!" Lotta exclaimed, filled with distress as she always was when any cross or unkind words were exchanged. She put her arms around Contrition and kissed her cheek. "Poor Dianna! What a dreadful thing to happen to you! I just wish I'd been there, I'd have scratched his eyes out!"

"Oh, it wasn't so dreadful. I wasn't hurt at all; he ran away as soon as he realized that I'm a girl. And he gave me all this money."

"You shouldn't have kept it," Dolly scolded her.

"I didn't have a chance to give it back. Besides, Mr. Davenport told me to keep it. He said it can be the beginning of my fund for getting to Albany. He says I'll need a heap of money for that. I haven't even counted it yet!"

The money was in a little heap on the counterpane where Contrition had dropped it. Evangeline's eyes brightened as she made a grab for it. Her fingers flew as she counted out the bills and coins.

"There's nineteen dollars and fifty cents!" she said. "This will swell our coffer considerably. There'll be no more camping out for a day or two, at least. And I'll be able to get my green slippers mended; they're in drastic need of it."

"The money belongs to Dianna." Dolly's voice was firm. "It isn't going into the coffer."

"Of course it isn't! Dianna's going to need every penny of it, and a lot more!" Lotta exclaimed.

"It's supposed to be share and share alike! That's always been the rule!" Evangeline's voice was as indignant as Lotta's. "I don't see why we should make an exception in Dianna's case!"

"It wasn't earned performing, that's why!" Lotta said.

"That's a matter of opinion! She must have performed rather well, even if it wasn't behind the footlights, to be given so much!"

Lotta's hand flew out and smacked Evangeline across the face. "Don't you say things like that about our Dianna!" Then, realizing what she had done, that she had actually struck someone in anger,

she burst into tears. It took a lot to make Lotta resort to violence, but an attack on Contrition's honor was going too far.

"Why, you . . ." Her face contorted with fury, making her look years older than she was, Evangeline made to return the blow, but Dolly interposed her considerable bulk between the two actresses.

"We'll have none of that! Evangeline, you had it coming, and Lotta's already sorry she slapped you, aren't you, Lotta?"

"Y-y-yes, I am." Carlotta paused, gulped, and added in a burst, "But I'll do it again if she says anything else mean about Dianna!"

The brief *contretemps* over, with Lotta still in tears and Vangie remembering what anger did to her face, Contrition was deep in thought.

"Are there many men like that one?" she wanted to know. "I mean, would it be likely that there'd be one in every audience?"

"Who's to say? I expect there's more than anybody knows about. But why in the world would you want to know such a thing?" Dolly asked, puzzled.

"Well, it was a plumb easy way to get money. And there's no danger involved, iffen they turn tail and run when they find out that the boy they're after's a girl. I could maybe collect a lot more while we travel around, iffen I get to play Puck again."

Dolly's gasp would have done credit to her on stage. "Dianna! Whatever put such a thought in your mind! The devil must be in this room! Don't you know what that would make you?"

"It'ud make me rich," Contrition said innocently.

"It would make you a Molly Turnover!" Evangeline snapped. Contrition asked, "Who's she?"

"Oh, my lands! I can see that I'm going to have to have a long talk with you, but not tonight! We're all tired. I'm going to join Mr. Burnside, and you girls had better get to bed yourselves." Dolly left the room, closing the door behind her.

"I only wanted to know who Molly Turnover is!" Contrition said plaintively.

"She isn't anybody." Lotta tried to explain. "I mean, she's anybody, any girl who's easy, who takes money from men for doing . . ." She broke off, her face going bright red.

"Oh, for goodness sake! Lotta's trying to tell you that Molly

Turnover is a name for prostitutes, for fallen women." Evangeline was already out of her dress and reaching for her nightgown, her full, still-firm breasts jiggling. "It's what you'd be if you went haying it with any more men."

"Haying it?" Contrition was completely bewildered.

"Climbing into haylofts with men to indulge in sex!" Evangeline snapped, exasperated.

"Oh. But I wouldn't be indulging in sex. I'd sort of be taking money for not indulging in sex because I'd be the wrong sex for those crazy old men. Besides, Henry said it served Mr. Barlowe right to lose his money so wouldn't it serve those other men right, too?"

Lotta's face crumpled with distress. "Of course it would serve them right, but you'd still be a prostitute. Taking money for anything involved with sex is prostitution."

"And to think I never even knew that word until tonight!" Contrition marveled. "Sometimes I think that the more education I get, the more complicated everything is!"

"Ignorance is bliss," Evangeline mocked her, climbing into bed. "Dianna, you sleep in the middle, Lotta always pokes me with her elbows. And stop trying to figure things out with that lame brain of yours, just take our word for it!"

"Actresses have to be especially careful," Lotta told Contrition much more kindly. "That's because almost everybody thinks that all actresses are prostitutes."

"Why on earth would they think that?" Contrition's innocence was deeper than even Lotta would have believed, and although it seemed impossible, her face burned even more brightly.

"It's because some of them . . . not us, in this troupe, Dolly would never stand for that even if we wanted to, and we certainly wouldn't want to . . . but some of them are like that."

"Well, I never!" Contrition said.

"Just see that you don't!" was Evangeline's last word.

There was another unpleasant scene in the morning, when Anton decreed that, because she had performed in last night's presentation, Contrition was to receive her share of the gate receipts.

"She isn't an actress, she's a rank amateur! She all but ruined us.

Our professional reputation will be in shreds if we ever let her set foot onstage again!" Evangeline protested, her face flaming with indignation. "She should be paying us for the privilege of sheltering her, not the other way around!"

"Fair's fair," Dolly said. "Mr. Burnside and I have talked it over, and Dianna's a bona fide member of the troupe. She'll not only be playing small parts as fast as we can prepare her for them, but she more than pulls her weight in other ways. Now where's Henry? It's time we were moving out; we aren't making any money lolling around. It's already past ten, and the wagons are all hitched, and as for Dianna, she's the one who hitched them because Henry's nowhere to be seen."

As though her words had conjured him up, Henry appeared, walking with a purposeful stride and carrying a bundle under his arm. He handed the bundle to Contrition. "I thought you could use this," he said. "You can't go around with only that makeover milkmaid costume to your name. Lotta will make it up for you."

It was a length of fine-woven gingham, in a blue and white check. Lotta gasped with pleasure, and Vangie gasped with indignation.

"Gingham! Crocus would have done as well!"

"Oh, Vangie, crocus is such a cheap, rough cloth! This is beautiful! My fingers are just itching to stitch up something really dicty for Dianna, I know just the pattern for her!"

There was a second, much smaller package, and Contrition's eyes widened as she saw the blue kid slippers, a perfect match for the dress material. With a cry of delight, she plumped herself down on the ground and tried them on. My, but they were dainty! In the dress Lotta would make for her and these slippers, she for sure wouldn't be mistaken for a boy! "Mr. Davenport, I have nineteen dollars and fifty cents; is that enough to pay for all this?"

"It's impolite to offer to pay for a gift," Henry informed her. "You still have a lot to learn about manners." His voice was gruff to cover up his pleasure in Contrition's pleasure. "See if you can behave like a lady when you're dressed as one!"

Contrition glared at him, furious because Henry had put her down again, but her anger at him didn't tempt her to give the presents back. If he was going to be like that, then it served him right to have

to pay for the material and the slippers himself. Besides, if she saved the money she'd got from Mr. Barlowe to spend for a noble cause, such as bringing her father to ruin, maybe she wouldn't be a prostitute for having taken it, but if she paid for such fripperies as the material and the slippers with it, then maybe that would make her a prostitute. She still had a mort to learn about what constituted being a prostitute and what didn't.

Stowing her treasures in the Conniewagon, she took her place on the driver's seat and took up the lines. Jonathan Yeats took his place beside her. It was an eminently satisfactory arrangement; while Contrition drove, Jonathan coached her in her lines and added a little more each day to her general education. She could already recite the times tables through fifteen, she had a general idea of the geography of the United States and Europe and Africa and Asia, and her vocabulary was expanded by leaps and bounds. Along easy stretches of the road Jonathan was able to take over the driving while Contrition read to him from Dolly's Bible or from a script, making fewer mistakes all the time. As a pupil, Contrition was extraordinarily quick, and as a tutor, Jonathan Yeats could have been, if he had chosen, an instructor in the finest school for young gentlemen. His decision to be an actor rather than a teacher was the theatre's gain and education's loss.

Driving the wagon that hauled the props, Henry was composing a risible burletta in his mind, an original work that would contain a small part for Contrition. The part would have to be that of a young lad, of course, but it would give her experience. The life of a traveling thespian wasn't easy, he thought, and it certainly wasn't remunerative, but as long as Contrition remained with the Olympians, she would be safe and protected and certainly far happier than she would have been if she hadn't had the courage to run away from her stepfather, however asinine her motives were. Bring Gerald Haywood to ruin, indeed! Bring herself to ruin was what she'd do if someone wasn't able to talk her out of it.

Being a native of Schenectady, practically on Albany's doorstep, Henry was casually acquainted with the Haywood family, although neither Contrition nor any other member of the troupe knew that. Gerald Haywood himself wasn't all that formidable. Henry had

always thought him rather weak, for all his aristocratic manner and the handsomeness that still, as he was nearing middle age, set feminine hearts to fluttering. It was John Haywood, Gerald's father, who was a force to be reckoned with. Shrewd, hard, ruthless in his quest for power, no slip of an uneducated, naive farmgirl could hope to bring him down. He'd destroy her so completely that her life would be ruined.

There were Gerald Haywood's legitimate children to be considered as well. Henry wasted no sympathy on Elizabeth Haywood, Gerald's wife. To Henry's way of thinking, the woman was a horror. Proud and overbearing because of her family connections and the fortune that had been the deciding factor in causing John Haywood to choose her to be his only son's wife, Elizabeth was a formidable figure of a woman, tall for her sex and built on the lines of a battleship. Her cold, pale-blue eyes never seemed to smile, but only to calculate the social and financial worth of the society over which she ruled as a virtual queen. Other ladies of society quailed at her displeasure, and a frown from Elizabeth Haywood could ruin any lady's chances of being accepted into the best homes.

But there were the children, none of whom, fortunately, had seemed to inherit any of either their mother's or their grandfather's characteristics. The older boy, Walter, was at present matriculating at Colgate, the younger still attended a local school, and the oldest child, Phoebe, only a year younger than Contrition, was so self-effacing and shy that it was difficult to be aware that she existed at all. The boys, being boys, might weather any family-connected scandal without undue harm, but it would devastate Phoebe, not only because she adored her father but because it would ruin any chance she might have for marriage.

Mulling and composing and stewing, Henry comforted himself with the thought that there was plenty of time to dissuade Contrition from going to Albany seeking revenge.

It was beyond all reason that he should have to have all these troubles to contend with, on top of his own. Damn it, where was Leon? If he ever got his hands on his cousin, he would with the greatest pleasure wring his neck. Not, of course, until Leon had exonerated him from the murder of Miss Flora Baldwin.

In the lead wagon, Contrition had given over the lines to Jonathan, and she was reading to him from the Bible. “‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters . . .’”

She broke off. “What does that mean? Why does it say ‘still’ waters?”

Jonathan was pleased. Dianna was bright, she saw things that other people never thought to question.

“Sheep refuse to drink from running water. The water has to be still, as in a pond.”

“Oh, I never knew *that!*” Contrition said, impressed. “We had some sheep at the farm, but we didn’t have a brook, just a well, and a pond for them to drink from.” She bent her head to the Bible again.

“‘He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.’

“‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.’

“‘Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil;’

“I’d like to have a table prepared for me in the presence of my enemies. That’s just what I want, to sit down at a table with my real father, an honored guest, with everybody looking up to me, so that when I denounce him it’ll hurt him all the worse. But I don’t think I’d like to have my head anointed with oil. That’d be messy, and besides, wouldn’t it run down into my eyes?”

“I’m sure that whatever table you sit at with your father, nobody will attempt to anoint your head with oil. The psalm was written in Old Testament times, far before the birth of Christ. People don’t anoint other people’s heads with oil any more. Continue.”

“Well, that’s a relief! ‘My cup runneth over.

“‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the lord forever.’ Mr. Yeats, that’s beautiful! I like it. I’m going to learn it by heart.”

“You’d better, because it will be required that you know it, if you

are to achieve your goal. It's recited in church services often, everyone knows it."

"I have a heap to learn, don't I?"

"You have a great deal to learn, not a heap. In the society you hope to enter, nobody says heap."

"My, I do have a heap to learn, don't I? I mean, I have a great deal to learn. I'll drive now, Mr. Yeats. You coach me in reciting the 23rd Psalm. I'll know the whole thing by time for our nooning, just see if I don't!"

"And you'll have to learn a good many hymns, as well," Jonathan told her. "It will be expected that you know the words without having to refer to the hymnal."

"If I have to, then I'll do it." Contrition's chin was set, and the steely expression of purpose on her face made an odd contrast to the gentle words of the psalm as she set about reciting it, verse by verse, under Jonathan's coaching.

Hymns, psalms. How to walk, how to enter a room, how to sit down in a chair and how to stand up again. How to hold a teacup and which fork to use at the dinner table. Land amercy, why did there have to be more than one fork? A body only had one mouth! How to make polite conversation. "How do you do, Mrs. Morton. Is this not a lovely day?" What if it were raining?

Don't say "a heap" of things. Don't say "a mort" of things. Say "a good many" things. Don't say this, do say that. Don't walk as though you were running a race, a lady walks slowly, with short steps. Well, a lady would never get the haying done!

Beside her, watching her fondly as she mastered the 23rd Psalm, Jonathan saw the determined set of her chin, and he almost felt sorry for Gerald Haywood when Contrition should appear in his life to bring him to ruin.

7

ROCHESTER was a thriving town, growing by leaps and bounds because of the Erie Canal, that narrow, man-made waterway that was changing the economy and social structure of the entire country. Real estate was booming, fortunes were being made, culture was being brought to heretofore-isolated communities along with freedom from a good deal of the drudgery that had been the people's lot when they'd either had to make do with what they could manufacture with their own hands or else do without.

Book boats brought books, either to be read on the spot or bought; barges brought cloth so that housewives no longer had to card their own wool, spin it into thread, and weave it into homespun. Strangers arrived on every canalboat, just passing through or to stay, bringing news and new ideas with them. Minds expanded, social life accelerated. Rochester was enjoying an unprecedented prosperity, and what was good for Rochester was good for the Olympians.

Rochester would be a good stand. It had taken trouble and time to get here, but that would be made up when they played for a week or even longer, satisfying the swarming population's desire for entertainment. They'd be able to play matinées as well as evenings, every day except on Sunday. Even in Rochester, as ungodly as it was with all its hustle and bustle and not inconsiderable seamy side of life, playacting on a Sunday would not be tolerated.

The troupe was in high fettle as they drove their wagons through the town searching for a place to stay, but Evangeline was in the highest fettle of all as they saw that a party boat was making its way to a berth at one of the docks along the canal. Sixty feet long, the

barge was decorated with bunting, the horses were decked out with bows and bells, and even the hoggee, the lad who drove the horses, had a bright red bow on his whip. Contrition's eyes bulged. She'd never thought to see the like.

"Swell! A party of Corinthians with money burning holes in their pockets!" Evangeline breathed, her face filled with avid anticipation. "I'll be sure to be given a testimonial once they've witnessed my Juliet!"

"Of course you will, Vangie! Your Juliet is lovely, simply lovely!" Lotta enthused, clasping her hands, her eyes alight with admiration. There was no jealousy in Lotta, even though she herself had never been the recipient of a testimonial and Vangie had had three last season.

"What's a testimonial?" Contrition wanted to know. It seemed like there was no end to the things she didn't know.

"Oh, they're wonderful!" Lotta told her, breathless at the very thought. "They're when some rich men, a single gentleman or a group of them, decide to honor an actress for her beauty and talent. They give a big supper at an inn or tavern, the whole troupe is invited of course, and they present the actress with a silver cup and a wreath of wax flowers and make beautiful speeches about how wonderful she is! A testimonial is the most exciting thing that can happen to an actress!"

"It's no more than our due," Evangeline said. "And I'm long overdue for one playing with this flea-bitten troupe, although even the Olympians haven't been able to keep me from receiving some of the honor that my artistry merits."

"And you can use the money, too," Carlotta said, always practical.

"They give the actress money?" Contrition's eyes were wider than ever. My lands, if they gave the actress money, she'd better study her lines harder so that she could be given a testimonial or two before she went to Albany.

"No, not money. That would smack of . . . you know—" Lotta hurried over that rough spot "—but she sells the silver cup back to the whitesmith, not for its full price, of course, but still it's pure profit."

That was almost as good, Contrition thought, but then her spirits were dashed as she realized that it wasn't likely that she'd ever be

given a testimonial, having to play boys' parts as she did. No gentleman would give a testimonial for a boy unless he were "that" kind of a gentleman, and even then he couldn't because everyone would know. If she couldn't accept money from gentlemen because she was a girl when they'd thought she was a boy, and if she couldn't have a testimonial because she always had to play boys, there wasn't any way she could add to the nineteen dollars and fifty cents that Mr. Barlowe had given her because she was a girl, and the few dollars that had been her share, so far, of the profits.

To the troupe's delight, Elmer Tibbs had managed to procure a hall for them with a genuine stage on which to perform. Unknown to the rest of the Olympians, Henry had given Elmer enough money before Elmer set off to ensure the hiring of a hall. Whatever the rental was, Elmer would tell Anton that it had been half that.

It wasn't the first time Henry had employed devious means to see that the Olympians had a decent place to play, although he couldn't do it too often because he would be hard pressed to explain where the money had come from. He couldn't very well tell them that Leon had given it to him before he'd had to take to his heels to elude the authorities who were intent on hanging him. It was a good thing that Leon had been so generous because his father, the judge, sent him nothing, being of the opinion that Henry's foolishness had gotten him into this predicament and that it was up to Henry to stew in his own juice until he could be got out of it, in hopes that it would teach him a lesson.

Their presentation of *Romeo and Juliet* was a triumph. The hall was packed, and even as Anton played Romeo's father, Montague, Contrition, watching from the wings, could see him rubbing his hands together in glee as he counted up the take.

Because of the limited cast, Henry's presence onstage was essential, so he played Mercutio, Romeo's friend, but he was so transformed in his costume and wig that even Leon would have been hard put to recognize him.

Contrition herself was constrained to play a page, her lines almost nonexistent but her slight figure and short mop of curls making her an appealing page indeed, even when the packed hall and the presence of the nobs from the party boat threw her into such a dither

that she stuttered her lines. Fortunately, the easily pleased audience liked her stuttering, and when she received a spattering of applause at the curtain call, Jonathan whispered at her to keep the stuttering in for subsequent performances.

Personally, Contrition thought that *Romeo and Juliet* was stupid. In the first place, Juliet was too young to have a sweetheart. She was only supposed to be twelve years old, for goodness sake, and even if Jonathan had explained to her that girls matured earlier in those days, and in warm climates, it was still too young. In the second place, the lines were silly; and in the third place, to have Romeo take poison because he thought Juliet was dead and then for Juliet to kill herself because he was dead made for a mightily unhappy ending, and there was enough unhappiness in the world without players adding more. But Jonathan told her that it was one of the world's greatest masterpieces, and she herself had observed, although not being able to understand it, that ladies liked to be brought to tears. All the same, the play was stupid.

The applause for her part of the page was gratifying, and she was happy for Henry when his role as Romeo's friend received even more applause. But it was Evangeline who brought down the house, and wave after wave of applause sent her to simpering and tossing her head and preening, the applause, to her mind, being only what she deserved for her superb performance.

They had a late supper at the inn where their replenished coffers allowed them to spend the night, dining heartily and reveling in their enthusiastic welcome to Rochester.

"They adored me!" Vangie exclaimed, her face flushed and her eyes shining. "Did you ever hear such applause? I was a triumph!"

"At the risk of offending you, dear lady, I would that you had played the part of Juliet with a little less concupiscence," Jonathan told her. "Juliet was a modest, sheltered child, not a courtesan."

"Concupiscence" must be a really good word, Contrition thought, storing it in her memory bin, or else it wouldn't have made Vangie so mad. No, there she went again, not mad, *angry*. At least she hadn't made that mistake out loud recently; it had been at least two weeks since she'd seen Henry flinch and Jonathan direct his gentle frown at her for saying mad instead of angry.

"What right has a besotted has-been to tell me how to play my roles?" Vangie demanded, the picture of righteous indignation.

"Now, Vangie, Jonathan hasn't had a drink for . . ." Dolly's forehead furrowed as she tried to think how long it had been. "Not since Dianna joined our troupe! And he does have the experience. It wouldn't do any harm to take his advice."

"My advice is to try to project the innocence the part calls for, rather than portray a flagrant seductress." Jonathan's dignity was unruffled in spite of Evangeline's referral to his drinking problem. And Dolly was right. He hadn't had a drink since Contrition had joined the company. Her advent into his life had given him a new direction, something to strive for, not only to shape her into an adequate performer but to be a father to her, the father she had never had any more than he had had a daughter. Contrition was a breath of spring air, a promise of new beginnings.

Those were good words too, Contrition thought, "flagrant" and "seductress." She certainly was learning a mort of words. If she stayed with the Olympians long enough, she'd be able to talk like a goldarned dictionary! It was worth putting up with Vangie's meanness for.

"Tomorrow night, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," Anton said, putting a stop to the altercation by changing the subject.

"But my love, we did that so recently!" Dolly protested.

"But not in Rochester, my dear. It's one of our best productions, and Dianna's Puck will add to its success now that she has a little more experience. It will be another triumph, you can take my word for it."

Evangeline, her face flaming, left the table and swept out of the common room, seething because Contrition was again to have more of a part than she deserved. Lotta watched her go, her face filled with consternation.

"Vangie doesn't like for Dianna to have real parts," Lotta fretted. "She'll be even harder to get along with."

"Miss La Lune will simply have to swallow her bile and go along with the rest of us. A temperamental actress can do nothing but disrupt a troupe, and now that things are going so well, I will not tolerate any temperament on her part. Besides," Anton finished,

belching, "she'll be so wrapped up in her own applause that she won't notice anybody else's."

Having stuffed themselves to satiation, the troupe retired for the night. But in spite of the goose-feather mattress and the satisfaction of the play having been such a success, Contrition found herself restless, searching for sleep without finding it.

After an hour of tossing, she realized what was the matter. She wanted to see Henry, to tell him that everybody in the troupe thought his new burletta was the best he had ever written, to tell him that Mr. Burnside thought that her own Puck was getting better all the time. In other words, she wanted to be with him.

It was a pity that Henry never joined the rest of them at the inns, that he missed the wonderful meals that their efforts had earned them. What on earth could he have eaten tonight, out there at the campsite where he'd headed immediately the play had been over? There was little enough left in the Conniewagons after their long trek to Rochester. A heel of stale bread a pig would have had trouble chewing, a rind of cheese, a handful of coffee to be boiled up in the pot. Poor Henry! He must be ravenous, and lonesome, and it just wasn't right because his burletta had added so much toward the success of the evening's performance.

With Contrition, to think was to take action. She slipped out of bed, having to crawl over Lotta, thankful that Lotta slept like a log, and pulled on her page costume and made her way down to the common room which was still well filled in spite of the lateness of the hour. Rochester was a live town, the canalers and land speculators and other enterprising men who frequented its streets having money in their pockets and the inclination to spend it in having a good time.

"Still hungry?" The landlord's brows rose when Contrition made her request. "I thought that all of your troupe packed away enough to feed an army!"

"I'm a growing boy," Contrition said.

She waited while the landlord wrapped slices of roast beef and ham in a napkin, a good-sized piece of cheese, bread split and buttered, and a piece of rhubarb pie. "Mind you don't eat it all at once," he admonished her, while several of the canalers laughed,

remembering their own stripling days when their stomachs had been bottomless pits no matter how much they had eaten. When Contrition made to pay the landlord for the food from the few coins that she carried with her, one of the canalers closed her hand over them again and told her to keep them.

"I saw the play tonight. Don't have no idea what it was all about, but you was good, lad. It's my treat. At least your stuttering was something I could understand; I used to stutter myself when I was a lad."

"T-t-thank you, s-s-sir," Contrition said, and escaped during the general laughter. Not back to the room she shared with Lotta and Vangie, but out into the innyard and then through the still thinly populated streets to make her way toward the campground at the edge of town.

A group of four canalers, well in their cups and seeking a tavern to continue their revels, bore down on her from the opposite direction. They stopped, forming a line in front of her so that there was no way she could pass. Burly men, rough as were all canalers, they looked her over and found cause for ribald mirth in her costume.

"What in the devil have we here?" one of them, who seemed to be their leader, demanded. "What in tarnation is it? I never saw the like!" Obviously, they had not seen the play.

"I'm just a boy. Let me pass, please."

"A boy, is it? Dressed like that? Or are you some kind of furriner, who doesn't know how a lad is supposed to dress in this country? I think that the pinkling ought to be taught a lesson, and how better than to give him and his foppery finery a good dunking?"

"You wouldn't dast!" Contrition said, but her heart was sinking because she knew very well that they would dast.

"You're right. Mebby them duds would look better wet than dry."

They did dast. The leader grasped her arm, his followers helped to drag and push her to a horse trough a few yards down the street, and willy-nilly, her spate of protests containing words that drew hilarious appreciation from them, she was lifted and dropped into the water, thinking at only the last moment to drop the package of food so it wouldn't become as sodden as she was going to be.

The muddy water closed over her head as she was pushed under by ungentle hands. Fortunately, she had the wits to hold her breath after the first mouthful all but strangled her.

She was allowed to pop up again, only to be dunked under again, the drunken canalers considering the dunking of a young fop to be the best sport they'd had in many a day. Drat and blast, did they mean to drown her? It was unfair, it was the most unfair thing she'd ever heard of, to drown in a horse trough before she'd had a chance to get to Albany and bring her father to ruin.

Filled with fury at the unfairness of it, she flailed and kicked, and this time when her head popped above the surface they let it stay up, tiring of their sport. Splutteringly, Contrition gave them a piece of her mind. Fortunately for her, some of the words she used were ones she'd learned from Jonathan Yeats, explicit in their meaning but so obscure to the uneducated canalers that they failed to grasp them.

"Scurrilous miscreants! Unmitigated buffoons!" Contrition screamed.

"There, didn't I tell you the pinkling's a furriner? Don't even speak English! Let's go, my throat's so dry I could spit sawdust!"

Soaked to the skin, her hair clinging to her head with water dripping into her eyes, squishing with every step she took in the silly, pointed shoes that were part of her pageboy costume, Contrition retrieved her package of food and set out again. It never crossed her mind to return to the inn without accomplishing her mission of taking Henry the food so that he, too, could sleep with a full stomach. It wasn't the first time she'd been wet in her life, although she had seldom been as wet as this. She expected that she was lucky that worse hadn't happened to her in this silly costume. The canalers might have taken the notion to rip it off of her, and then she would have been in a pretty pickle!

This time she kept to the shadows and byways, her sense of direction unfailing, and in a remarkably short time she emerged into open country and the campsite was directly in front of her.

Still soggy and sodden, her teeth chattering now in spite of the mildness of the evening, she found Henry rolled up in his blanket, asleep, beside the campfire that had smouldered down to a few coals.

She nudged him with the toe of her shoe. "Mr. Davenport. Mr. Davenport, wake up! I've brought you something to eat."

The precariousness of his new existence had trained Henry to come fully awake at the least sound or movement. He sat up, his incredulous eyes taking in the sight of a half-drowned water rat.

"Dianna! What the devil happened to you?"

"I went swimming," Contrition said. "It seemed like a nice night for it."

Henry was already on his feet, throwing sticks on the fire and poking it into new flames. "You little moron! Get out of those wet clothes before you take your death!"

Contrition proffered him the heavily laden napkin. "This is for you. And don't you go shouting at me, it isn't my fault that some drunken canalers thought I was a fop and dunked me in a horse trough. You ought to thank me for having the wits to drop your supper so it didn't get ruint!"

"Thank you. You idiot! You cretin! And the word is ruined, not ruint!"

Contrition dropped "cretin" into her word bin. It was a pity she hadn't had that word to fling at the canalers.

"Get out of those clothes!" When she didn't move fast enough to obey him, Henry began removing them for her, his fingers making a fumble of the laces that were used instead of buttons on the jerkin.

His fingers stiffened and his hands froze as the laces came undone. Good lord almighty, look what was under that costume! In his anger, he'd forgotten that Contrition was all of seventeen and not the little girl he had at first mistaken her for. There was a pair of firmly developed breasts, as delectable as Henry had ever dreamed of in his most shameful adolescent dreams.

He stood there frozen and staring before he collected himself. With her wet hair plastered to her head, Contrition looked more like a boy than ever, but her body was no boy's, her eyes were warm and questioning as they searched his face, her mouth was beautifully moulded, and she was altogether the most desirable piece of womanflesh Henry had ever hoped to encounter. Whatever had made him think that she was a plain girl? She was beautiful, everything about her was beautiful, and he had an almost uncontrollable desire to crush

her in his arms and kiss that mouth until it would swell up as though it were bee-stung, and caress that perfect body until his raging senses were sated.

"Well, aren't you going to give me that blanket so's I can get out of these dratted pantaloons? Wet as they are, they're going to cling like glue; maybe you'll have to help me skin out of 'em," Contrition said.

Henry jerked out of his seizure and reached for the blanket, draping it over her shoulders. "You'll manage. What's in the napkin? As grateful as I am that you brought it, I ought to turn you over my knee and whale you for coming out alone at night in a town as rough as Rochester. Whatever possessed you?"

Struggling with the tights, which were as clinging and hard to remove as she had thought they would be, Contrition said "Drat! There's beef and ham and cheese and bread and a piece of pie. You're going to have to help me. These stupid pants are stuck to me like a second skin!"

Henry's face paled. His hands grew a dozen thumbs as he reached under the blanket to tug at the troublesome breeches. "Hose," they were called, Jonathan had told him. Whatever they were called, all the men back in those time must have been out of their minds to wear such inconvenient and ludicrous pants.

Contrition had hips, Henry discovered, slender but rounded hips, and her waist was so small he wouldn't have had any trouble at all clasping his two hands around it with room left over. Every inch of her was a woman. He couldn't, at the moment, say a warm and eager woman, because Contrition was shivering and shaking with cold, but for the first time in his life Henry could conceive of a cold and shivering desirable woman.

"I'm going to tell Lotta to fasten you to herself with a rope after this, so you can't go sneaking off trying to get yourself killed!" Henry raged. He had to rage; it was the only acceptable outlet for his rampaging emotions. "She can tie a rope around your waist and the other end to her toe!"

"Of all the unmitigated ingratitude!" Contrition's usage of the words in her word bin was improving by leaps and bounds. "I only came out at night, alone, for you, because I thought you'd be

hungry! And I thought you'd like to know how everybody liked your burletta, *Matthew's First Love*. And I guess I wanted to tell you that they liked me in the part of young Cyril, too. Don't you think I did it good, Mr. Davenport?"

She was chattering on like a moron because the feeling of Henry's hands on her body was doing things to her that she had never dreamed of. All sorts of hitherto-unknown sensations were racing through her body, and she couldn't keep her eyes off Henry's face, especially his mouth, as all at once, out of nowhere; she had an overwhelming desire to know what it would be like to be kissed by that mouth. "There, I can get them the rest of the way off by myself, now. Eat your supper."

Thank God for that! Henry yanked his hands out from under the blanket as though he were yanking them out of fire. "Wrap that blanket closer around you and get up close to the fire while I hang up your costume."

"Is it ruint? I mean ruined? Is everyone going to be mad at me?" Contrition, at the moment, didn't give a hang whether she'd said mad or angry; using one word at a time correctly was enough for a body to have to think of. She was here with Henry, and that was the only thing in the world that mattered. Besides, Lotta would be able to fix the costume; Lotta could fix anything no matter how bedraggled and dirty it was. "I'm warm enough now. I'll just climb up in the Conniewagon and get into my old dress. And I'd better sleep here for the rest of the night. I don't relish the thought of walking back to the inn, as a girl, after what already happened to me."

"You'll do no such thing. Didn't anyone ever teach you anything about conventions?"

"What's conventions?"

"Conventions are the decent and moral way to behave!" Henry shouted at her. It wasn't the exactly correct interpretation of the word, but it was the closest he could come to make Contrition realize that young ladies did not spend the night with young gentlemen in a camp that was deserted except for the two of them.

"What's indecent about sleeping?" Contrition wanted to know.

"Shut up," Henry told her. "Just shut up and get your dress on! I'll walk you back to the inn."

Contrition glared at him. "You haven't even thanked me for bringing you your supper."

Henry couldn't help it. He had to do just this much if he never did anything else for the rest of his life. "Thank you for bringing me my supper," he said. And he kissed her cheek.

Contrition felt as though she'd grabbed ahold of the handles of that crazy contraption, an electric pleasure box, that gave what Lotta had described to her as the most delicious sensation for the price of one penny. There were places, Lotta had told her, that had all sorts of strange and wonderful things, all at penny prices or only a little more, but so far Contrition hadn't gotten to patronize any of them. It would be gratifying to see a two-headed calf or a mechanical chess-playing man or to have her fortune told by a genuine gypsy queen. Having her fortune told would be the best of all, because she would dearly like to hear how she was going to bring her father to ruin.

But right now, she didn't need to take hold of an electrical pleasure box because the electric shocks that were going through her were worth a deal more than a penny, and they were lasting longer, too.

They were looking at each other, their breaths stilled. Henry broke the silence after it seemed as if they had both been struck dumb. Henry clenched his hands into fists, sweat popping out on his forehead. Seventeen, and she *was* seventeen, was a young woman, not a little girl, and there was no way to get around it. A marriageable young woman, a young woman fully ripe for love. And Henry, with the youth of his twenty-one years and his superb health, was nothing if not virile. He'd better get Contrition back to the inn before something happened that Dolly would kill him for.

"Let's get started."

"What?" Contrition came out of her trance slowly, and it took her a moment to realize that Henry wanted to get her back to the inn so he could come back and eat his supper and get some sleep.

Reluctantly, she fell into step beside him. "I'll have to come back in the morning to get my Puck costume. I hope Lotta can fix it."

"Of course she can fix it. I'll dunk it in a bucket of clean water, and it'll be dry by morning."

Contribution would have liked nothing better than to stay at the campsite with Henry in hopes that he might kiss her again. But on sober reflection, she'd better go back to the inn. She thought of her mother's experiences with her stepfather, with her real father. It hadn't led her to believe that concourse with the opposite sex was anything to look forward to. On the contrary, it had made her think that any girl who entered into the state of matrimony willingly must be a ninny.

But now, in the course of only a few minutes, everything had changed. If that kiss on the cheek was any example, love and what came naturally must be something downright magical. Contribution's emotions were mixed. On the one hand she felt like gathering up her skirts and running for her life, but on the other hand she had a most unreasonable desire to explore further possibilities.

Walking beside her, his hands thrust into his pockets, Henry was silent and glum. His emotions were almost as roiled as Contribution's. He had enough problems on his hands without allowing himself to become involved with this child-woman beside him. He was still stunned at the impact that simple, meant to be no more than friendly, kiss on the cheek had aroused in him. He had no right to fall in love or to allow any woman to fall in love with him, not until his innocence of that murder could be proved. First a bride, and then a widow, wasn't much to offer a woman.

Unfortunately, he was afraid that it was too late for him to do anything about his own state of emotions where Contribution was concerned. This young woman, whom he'd done his utmost to believe was a child all these past weeks, had got under his skin. His insisting to himself that she was a child had been a means of self-defense, but tonight the barriers had come down, and now he was defenseless.

But that didn't mean that he had any right to involve Contribution in a relationship that might very well end in disaster. It wasn't as if they weren't both young enough to wait and see if his problems would be resolved.

He was tempted to tell her about his problems. He was more than tempted. The need to tell her was an ache inside of him. But he had no more right to force her to share his worries than he had to

encourage her to fall in love with him. She was so young, and she'd never had a happy life—she'd known nothing but trouble for as long as she'd lived before she'd come to the Olympians. She was happy with the Olympians, and Henry was determined that she should go on being happy. It was long past time that she should know some happiness.

Contribution walked in equal silence now, a silence that was becoming increasingly tinged with anger. Drat him anyway! It wouldn't have hurt him to kiss her again. She'd simply like to know if a second peck on the cheek would result in the same spinetingling sensations she'd felt the first time.

Well, there was one way to find out. She stopped in her tracks as the inn loomed in sight. The street was deserted now, there was no one to see, and she meant to find out right this minute before the opportunity was lost forever.

Before Henry had any notion of what she was about, she turned and put her arms around his neck and stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him. She meant to kiss his cheek, but Henry was so startled that he jerked his head and her kiss landed squarely on his mouth.

What happened was altogether unreasonable. Flame exploded and engulfed them, burning them, fusing them together. Henry's arms were around her, holding her desperately, and the kiss went on and on while Contribution's bones melted and her flesh was consumed. If she died right this minute, right in this spot, if the Olympians came out of the inn in the morning and found only a heap of ashes where her body should have been, then at least she'd have died knowing what it was all about.

Shuddering, Henry pushed her away from him after it seemed that nothing in the world could ever pry them apart.

"You're back. Now scat!"

"Scat!" Contribution spluttered. "Well, I never!"

"Scat!" Henry said again, praying that she'd do it before he grabbed her up and dragged her back to the campsite and finished what she had started.

Deflated, furious with herself and more furious with Henry, Contribution scatted. So much for thinking that Henry liked her! For a minute there, when they'd been kissing each other, she'd thought

that he did like her, that he liked her a whole lot, because how could he kiss her like that if he didn't? She was still shaking from it, drat him! And there he was, walking off from her as though it hadn't meant a thing in the world to him!

She felt like pounding her head against the wall of the inn before she went in, to knock some sense into it or some nonsense out of it. One thing was for sure, she wouldn't ever make such an unmitigated fool of herself again! Her face burning with shame, she crept back up to the room she shared with Vangie and Lotta, shucked out of her old dress, and crawled across Lotta's unstirring body to take her place between them. But not, however, to sleep. She was awake for the better part of what remained of the night, burning alternately with desire and with fury.

How she was to face Henry tomorrow, she had no idea. She'd ignore him, that's what she'd do. She'd pretend that he didn't mean a thing in the world to her, that she'd just been teasing him, flirting for the fun of it.

If he told anybody, she'd kill him!

All the same, she wished, just as she'd wished when she and Henry had been kissing each other, that the kiss could have gone on and on into eternity.

The Olympians played Rochester for four nights, matinées and evening performances. Contrition gained confidence in her parts, throwing herself into perfecting them because it helped to keep her mind off Henry, who ignored her except to make nasty remarks about her acting ability or lack of it. Maybe Henry thought she was a nothing, but the audiences liked her! She'd show him that she wasn't to be taken lightly, that he didn't mean any more to her than she meant to him!

"Whatever's the matter between you and Mr. Davenport?" Lotta asked, distressed. "You're at each other's throats!"

"Are we? I wasn't aware of it," Contrition said sweetly.

"You looked like you were going to hit him just now when he told you to stop simpering!"

"I wouldn't lower myself to hit him. He'd just better keep his advice to himself, that's all. It's Mr. Burnside and Mr. Yeats who have the right to tell me how to emote my lines, not Mr. Davenport."

"All the same, the burletta is his work, and he should know how you should play the part he wrote. Please be nice, Dianna!"

"I'll be nice when he's nice," Contrition said, her voice allowing for no compromise.

Between Henry and Evangeline, Contrition wasn't finding her lot easy. Evangeline didn't like it when Contrition's performances drew applause. Fortunately, Vangie drew so much more applause that she was mollified. For all four of the evening performances, the dozen young Corinthians from the party boat occupied front seats, rising to their feet every time Evangeline delivered her lines with rolling eyes and expressions of anguish.

Her face flushed with triumph, her performances more concupiscent than ever as she postured and simpered, Vangie was in her element. She flung her voluptuous figure around, striking poses that would show it off to the best advantage. She slanted her eyes in the most flirtatious manner toward the young Corinthians when she should have been directing her attention to Gavin, with whom she was supposed to be fatally enamored.

Gavin was put out at the applause Evangeline received; Dolly and Anton were gratified because Vangie's triumph was filling the coffer to overflowing; Lotta was thrilled for her fellow actress; Jonathan Yeats was enraged at what Vangie was doing to the Bard's immortal lines; and Contrition was simply disgusted, a disgust that she admitted to herself was more than a little laden with jealousy. How could she ever receive ovations like that, forced always to play a stripling boy? Once she'd brought her father to ruin and was of an age where her stepfather couldn't drag her back to the farm, she'd show them all!

Henry kept his own counsel and his own company except when he was forced to come into contact with the rest of them. Henry damned Leon from one end of Europe to the other. Where was that cousin of his? Why wouldn't he light someplace long enough for one of his father's letters to catch up with him?

Evangeline's triumph was complete when, after their final performance in Rochester, she was given a testimonial. Two dozen cupidones were delivered to her after the afternoon performance, more than she'd ever received in her acting career, every one of

them to be cherished, while Lotta oh'd and ah'd and Contrition pretended that she didn't care.

At the sumptuous supper the Corinthians regaled the troupe with after the evening performance, Vangie was presented with her wreath of wax flowers, with her silver cup. Evangeline was the blushing receiver of the recitation of half a dozen poems written by the smitten young gentlemen, vowing eternal devotion. Evangeline was the queen, the Corinthians and the rest of the troupe her court. Evangeline took it all seriously although she should have known that, to these spoiled and shallow young Corinthians, it was all a gamé.

As a result of her pique, Contrition drank too much during the course of the innumerable toasts, and as a result of drinking too much, her head felt queer and there was a definite queasiness in her stomach, and she sought the fresh air of the innyard before the celebration was over.

As was his habit, a habit that Contrition found infuriating, Henry loomed up out of nowhere. "You little idiot, you're tipsy!" he said.

"You'd be tipsy, too, if you'd come to the testimonial! And I'm not tipsy, I just don't feel very good."

"Well, well! You don't feel very well! You feel good like this!" Henry snapped, rubbing his fingers along her arm and pinching so that she could feel them.

"Thank you for the grammar lesson!" Contrition snapped back, ending, to her mortification, with a hiccup. She clapped her hand over her mouth, and it was just as well that she did, because the next instant Henry grabbed her and dunked her head into the horse trough.

"Blast you! Why'd you go and do that? Look at me!" Contrition wailed as her head emerged, dripping.

"It'll prevent you from returning to those sickening proceedings and getting even tipsier than you are!" Henry told her savagely. The little fool! Dressed in her page costume or not, she was female, and it was more than likely that one or more of those addlepated fops inside would realize that and turn their attentions to her. Young as she was, inexperienced, and tipsy, there was no telling where it might lead. "Get up to your room and wind up your hair in rags so

you'll be ready to pull out in the morning with a clear head as well as a handful of curls!"'

"You're hateful!" Contrition gasped, still dripping.

"And you're a foolish child! Get yourself inside, and go to bed! Parties like this are for adults who know how to protect themselves, not for green, little girls fresh off the farm!"'

"I'll show you who's a little girl!" Contrition said, blinded as much by fury as by the water in her eyes. Deliberately, because she was determined to get through that thick, supercilious skin of his, Contrition kissed him again, pressing the entire length of her body against his as she held him fast with her strong young arms. Damn him, she'd show him if it was the last thing she ever did!

For a moment, Henry was so shaken that he almost lost control of himself. There was nothing that he wanted more than to go on kissing this maddening girl until the sun came up. He was shaken to his core, the pain of wanting her was so acute that he groaned as he crushed her to him, the action of his arms involuntary and entirely against the dictates of his brain. Her mouth was warm and sweet, opening under his, her breasts were crushed against his chest, his brain was reeling.

A modicum of sanity returned to him at the last possible moment. He pushed her away from him, so hard that she nearly fell.

"You're tipsier than I thought you were! Get out of here, and stop playing games that were never meant for children!"'

Her knees feeling like wet rags and no more capable of holding her up, Contrition stared at him, her face white in the dim light from the stars. Henry hated himself for the hurt in her eyes, he cursed the day he'd ever met her. And then she turned and ran, smothering a sob that he nevertheless heard, and he hated himself more than ever.

If he ever got his hands on Leon, Leon would wish that he'd never been born.

"I hate you!" Contrition flung back over her shoulder. Henry could only hope that she meant it. If she was busy enough hating him, maybe she'd be too busy to fancy that she was in love with him. He only wished that he could claim that much consolation for himself!

8

CONTRITION stood in the stableyard at the inn in Palmyra, her hands on her hips and her eyes wide with disbelief. She'd never seen the like in all her born days and she doubted that she'd ever see the like in all the rest of them. It was beyond belief.

The horse was a trotter and he was magnificent. The morning sun glinted on his chestnut hide, making it shine with a brilliance that Contrition had never witnessed on any farm horse or even on any of the buggy horses and fine trotters that she'd been privileged to see now that she was an experienced traveler. The lines of the chestnut were clean and beautiful, his head was regal, his legs were long and slender. He was a king of a horse, so beautiful that it made her heart swell just to look at it.

But right at the moment, that regal head was tossing, those long, slender legs were prancing and stomping and rearing, at the young gentleman who was endeavoring to back him between the traces of the smartest buggy she had ever seen, struggled and sweated, his pleasant young face scarlet with the effort and the frustration.

"Good Zeus, nice Zeus, be a good fellow and let me hitch you up!" the young man cajoled.

Zeus snorted and tried to bite him. The young man ducked back, flinching, and the bridle was snatched from his hand as the horse reared again.

Contrition had had all she could stand. She walked toward the plunging animal and grasped its bridle.

"Behave yourself," she said.

The horse's hooves settled to the ground and he stood quietly, his

head resting trustfully on her shoulder. The young man stood gaping at her with his mouth open.

"How'd you do that?" he demanded, his eyes, baby blue in a round, open face, filled with disbelief.

"It's all in knowing how. You want him hitched?"

"I'd appreciate it, but he won't let me. He hates me." The young man's voice was doleful.

Contribution backed Zeus up. Zeus backed as if he were the oldest, most docile farm horse in the world. Contribution's voice and her hands were confident as she buckled buckles and arranged straps. Zeus nickered at her, wiggling his ears. "The bit's set just a little too tight. No wonder he doesn't like you."

"If I don't have it tight, he ups and runs away with me." The young man's voice was still doleful. "I don't want to hurt him, it's just that he won't behave. He hates me."

"Then why do you keep him? You could trade him for a horse you could handle, one that liked you."

"I don't want any other horse. I want this one. Zeus can beat any other trotter in the state. Or he could if he'd let me drive him, drat the luck. Begging your pardon, Miss."

"You'd do better to beg his pardon for not knowing how to handle him."

"I can handle other horses. I've always been able to handle other horses. I just can't handle Zeus. And I was going to win every race I could scare up this summer, before I was through!"

"Looks like he could win 'em, all right." Glory, what a horse! Contribution fairly yearned over him. She'd never dreamed of a horse as wonderful as this one. "Mind if I try him out?"

"You?" The baby-blue eyes filled with alarm. "Why, he'd get away with you and you'd be overturned in ten seconds flat! No young lady could handle Zeus!"

Contribution was already in the buggy, her hands on the ribbons. She lifted them and clucked. Zeus stepped out. Oh Lordy, how he stepped out! Clop, clop, clop, his legs moving like pistons, faster than she'd ever thought any horse could trot. She drove him in a circle in the spacious innyard, and he handled like a dream. His rhythm was perfect, he never missed a beat by a fraction of a

fraction of a second. Clop, clop, clop, his feet flew, his long dark mane flew, his head high, his ears pricked forward. He was enjoying this workout as much as Contrition was. Standing well out of the way, the young man looked as if he was going to cry.

"I don't see why you have any trouble with this horse," Contrition said, drawing it to a stop beside the young man. Zeus promptly snapped at him.

"He hates me," the young man said.

"Were I a man, I'd take him everywhere, and I'd win every race, and I'd end up rich," Contrition said, her eyes dreamy. There was a heap of money to be won betting on races, trotting owners being what they were, always ready to put everything in their pockets on their own trotter, convinced that they had the best.

"It isn't the money," the young man said miserably. "I just like to win. I never had a horse that could win before."

"That, too," Contrition acknowledged. "But the money would be nice, all the same." If she had some of the money this horse could win, she'd be in Albany in no time.

"Only I can't handle him."

"I know. He hates you."

"Well, he does!"

"He knows you're afraid of him, that's all."

The young man's face flushed scarlet. "I'm not afraid of him. I just don't want him to bite me; my arm is already black and blue. Well, not black and blue, he didn't bite me that hard, but he might the next time. And once he stepped on my foot and wouldn't get off for a full ten minutes, until he was good and ready to get off and let me move. He didn't put his weight on it, it was more like he was teasing me, showing me who was boss."

Zeus wiggled his ears at the young man, devils dancing in his eyes. "Stop that," Contrition said as Zeus made to snap at the young man. "Behave yourself." She could have sworn that Zeus looked disappointed, wiggling his ears at her again.

They'd pulled into Palmyra last night, only to find that there wouldn't be any use in the world of trying to play today, because some local gentlemen with trotters had got up a race, and anybody with any money in his pocket would be there to bet on his favorite.

It wasn't going to be a race in heats, just one straight race, and it wasn't a claiming race, none of the gentlemen wanting to take the risk of losing their trotter if it should win. It was just a race to determine the local championship. Three trotters were already entered in it and there was just room for one more, four being all the local stretch to be used as a racetrack could accommodate.

Mr. Burnside was disgusted, Dolly was disappointed, and Vangie and Gavin were furious at their bad luck that a race had been set for the same day they wanted to play. Lotta said that things like that happen, Jonathan Yeats intended to lay a bet of his own, and Henry didn't venture any opinion at all. Contrition only hoped that so many people wouldn't lose so much that they'd forego attending the performance tomorrow night. They hadn't done too well on their return swing from Rochester, most of the towns being little more than settlements and some of which they had played on their way. It was important to her to add a little to her fund of savings, else she'd never get to Albany.

All the same, she'd mightily like to see the trotting race. In all of her almost eighteen years, she'd never seen one, but Mr. Yeats had told her about them, how exciting they were and how beautiful the horses were with their sleek coats and their perfect rhythm. If the other horses in this race were anything like Zeus, it would be something to see. And it was certain that people bet on races and that some of them won and some of them lost.

The tiny germ of an idea grew in her mind, and it grew fast. She had nearly thirty-five dollars. Before she'd left the farm, thirty-five dollars would have seemed like a fortune to her, riches beyond imagining, but now, as she watched her savings grow with aggravating slowness, she was afraid that it would be years before she would have enough to establish herself in Albany long enough to reach her goal.

Ever since the night the rowdy canalers had taken her for some kind of a foppish boy and dunked her in the horse trough, Contrition had had a secondary but almost as compelling a reason to want to turn her back on the Olympians and get on with her real purpose in life. It was Henry.

Henry disturbed her. Henry drove her out of her mind. Henry

was, to put it mildly, ruining her life. So the sooner she had enough to go to Albany, the better, and then she would never have to be driven out of her mind again by being in proximity with him. She wasn't used to lying awake every night fretting and stewing about a man who didn't want her, and she didn't like it. She not only didn't like it, she wasn't going to stand for it.

And as long as she couldn't earn money fast enough for her purposes by fooling those odd-jobs, the men who liked boys instead of girls, into thinking she was a boy and having them pay her for keeping quiet the way Mr. Cyrus Barlowe had, and as long as being a bona fide actress brought in so little, there wasn't much left except for her to make money betting on horse races.

The next problem was how much of her almost thirty-five dollars she should risk. She didn't know what the odds would be, but she knew that the more she bet, the more she'd win, provided that Zeus won, and Zeus had just told her, plain as plain, that he was going to win. Should she risk five dollars? Ten dollars? Contrition closed her eyes and thought hard. If she was going to do it, she might as well bet twenty. Less than thirty-five dollars wasn't going to get her to Albany, but double twenty dollars and the almost fifteen dollars she'd still have after laying her bet would be almost fifty-five.

"Well, as long as I've got Zeus hitched up for you, I expect you won't have any trouble getting him as far as the race meet."

"I certainly won't. Look here, Miss, I don't even know your name! And I haven't thanked you for hitching up for me. You certainly know how to handle horses. You must have had a lot of experience with them."

"I had enough." Farm horses, she thought, smiling inwardly. This young gentleman would certainly be a lot more surprised than he already was if he knew she'd only had experience with farm horses and wagons. "I'm Dianna Laverne. I'm with the Olympians; we're going to play tomorrow night right here at the inn. We were going to play tonight, but Mr. Burnside decided that there wouldn't be enough gate after the race because the ones who win will be celebrating at taverns, and the ones who lose will be chary about spending money."

Sandy eyebrows shot up, and the young man looked so startled

that for a moment Contrition thought he was going to turn tail and run. Actresses not having a good repute among most people, maybe he thought he'd been contaminated just by having had this much contact with her, even if he was grateful that she'd hitched up his horse. And he certainly was a gentleman. Every stitch he had on was expensive, from the fawn-colored, tight breeches that hugged his legs to that ruffled shirt and the well-tailored jacket and that tall hat. She'd hate to think what just his boots must have cost. He had to be a gentleman, and a rich one at that, to afford such clothes, to say nothing about being able to go out and buy a horse like Zeus.

She met his eyes squarely, determined that she wasn't going to let him think that she thought that he was better than she was. But apparently she'd been wrong about him. The solidly built young man with the boyish, friendly face and the sandy hair was beaming with pleasure.

"An actress! A real actress! I never met an actress before, but I delight in attending the theatre! I wouldn't have thought that an actress would know as much about horses as you do, though."

"I wasn't always an actress." Contrition's eyes didn't falter. "I grew up on a farm." If he didn't like the truth, then he could go to tarnation.

"I never knew a young lady who grew up on a farm, either. You have certainly lived an interesting life! I'll tell you what. After I've won the race, I'll attend your offering tomorrow night, and afterwards I'll treat your whole company to supper with my winnings!"

Even if he were rich, and Contrition wasn't conditioned to think of rich people as being nice, he was nice. There wasn't a trace of snob about him, he wasn't a bit highfaluting.

"We'd surely appreciate that. We aren't sure how good the attendance will be, and having somebody buy us supper will be helpful."

"The best the inn has to offer, that's a promise. Oh, gosh! Where are my manners? You've told me your name, but I haven't told you mine. I'm Justin Odets. Look, I have to be going, but I'll see you this evening, won't I? I'm staying here at the inn, too."

He was holding out his hand to her, just as if she were a lady. Not only that, but when she gave him hers, he made a little bow,

sweeping off his tall hat. My, wouldn't Vangie be green with envy when she introduced this young Corinthian as a friend of hers and he bought them all supper! Only not for long, of course, because once Mr. Odets had laid eyes on Evangeline, he wouldn't have eyes for anybody else, but she'd have her moment of triumph no matter how brief it was. She certainly was glad that she was wearing the blue and white checked dress that Lotta had stitched up for her. It was the prettiest thing she'd ever owned, and if she hadn't worn it Mr. Odets might not have been so obliging toward her.

Smiling, she waved at Mr. Odets as Justin drove out of the inn-yard, Zeus looking back at her and behaving himself beautifully, just as if he were promising her that he'd behave himself at the race, too. Then she gathered up her skirts and raced into the inn, pelting up the steep staircase to burst into the room she was sharing with Vangie and Lotta.

"I've got to get my money. I'm going to the trotting race and I'm going to win a whole lot more! If you have any sense, you'll come too and bet whatever you have because I know which horse is going to win!"

"Dianna, you can't go to the race!" Lotta's face was filled with consternation. "Who knows who might be there? You could be recognized! Besides, you'll just lose your money. It's foolish to even think of betting it on a horse!"

"I've got to! I . . . I promised the horse!" Contrition said, wondering if Lotta and Vangie thought that what she'd just said was as silly as it sounded.

"But the risk! It isn't worth it! Not only risking your money but risking having someone recognize you!" Lotta's face was anguished. She couldn't bear to think of anything happening either to Contrition or to Contrition's dream of saving enough money to go to Albany.

"Do you really know one of the horses?" Evangeline's interest perked up, and her eyes took on an avid look. If there was anything Vangie liked, it was money, especially money that she didn't have to work for. "Are you that sure that it will win?"

"For certain I'm sure! I just saw the horse down in the inn-yard and he's a beauty, he's the most magnificent horse I ever saw! His

name is Zeus, and I know he's going to win because I drove him myself and I know what he can do."

Evangeline might not have had a high opinion of Contrition as an actress, but she had the highest respect for Contrition's knowledge of horses. "If you're that sure, I'll risk ten dollars on him. How about you, Lotta? I know you have something saved; you never spend a penny on yourself!"

Lotta flushed. It was true that she never spent a penny on herself, but she didn't want anyone to guess the reason for her thrift. Actually, she was saving all of her share of the Olympians' receipts to press on Contrition when Contrition went to Albany, determined to make sure that Contrition had enough so that she wouldn't have to suffer from the lack, or cut her stay short before she could bring that horrible man, Gerald Haywood, to ruin. She loved Contrition as much as if Contrition had been her little sister, but she knew that Vangie would deride her as a fool if she knew why Lotta was saving so diligently.

Lotta hesitated, studied Contrition's confident face, and made her decision. "All right, I'll risk ten dollars too." If her money were doubled, then there'd be that much more for Contrition when the time came.

"But you still mustn't go, Dianna. Evangeline and I will place your bet for you. Oh, dear, can ladies go to trotting races and place bets? I don't really know."

"We're actresses. The rules don't apply to us. Besides, I'm sure that Mr. Tibbs or Mr. Yeats will go with us and place our bets if the gentlemen there don't care to bet with ladies."

Lotta's face brightened. "Oh, yes! They should have the opportunity to place bets, too! We mustn't leave them out if it's such a sure thing! Dianna, what in the world are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm getting ready to go to the race!" Contrition said, clothes flying everywhere as she divested herself of the blue and white checked dress and her petticoat and underdrawers and camisole and began pulling on the boy's costume that she wore when she played the parts of boys in Henry's burlettas. Not a page costume, but ordinary lad's clothing. "Nobody'll recognize me in this!"

There was a much larger crowd at the site of the race than Contrition had dreamed of. The three entries from Palmyra were all local favorites, and money was changing hands at a great rate when they arrived. King Midas was sure to win. No, it was John's Toby who'd take all the honors. John's Toby? John's Toby didn't stand a chance, not against Apple Cider! Zeus, the dark horse that nobody had ever heard of, excited admiring comments, but very little money was risked on him. He was prancing around too much to be thought reliable.

Elmer and Jonathan, their own and the three girls' money in hand, moved through the crowd, placing their bets on Zeus to win. Elmer looked unhappy about it, but he was unwilling to pass up the opportunity to make a small killing. Jonathan was frankly excited, plunging more than he could afford, his courage and his faith in Contrition's judgment overriding his better judgment.

Contrition's heart was in her throat as the horses moved up to take their places at the starting line. Zeus was going to win, he just had to win! And then, from its place in her throat, her heart plummeted down into her stomach, because Zeus, that naughty creature, began prancing and plunging and side-stepping and rearing, and anybody with half an eye in his head could see that he'd made up his mind that he wasn't going to run at all. Contrition's heart plummeted from her stomach all the way down to her toes. Mr. Justin Odets was right. Zeus hated him.

She couldn't stand it. Not only her own twenty dollars was already down on Zeus but Evangeline's ten dollars and Lotta's ten dollars, and she didn't know how much Mr. Tibbs and Mr. Yeats had bet, but she knew that it was more than they could afford to lose. Besides, Zeus deserved to win because he was the best horse.

"Oh, glory me! We're going to lose our money!" Lotta wailed.

"You moron!" Evangeline lashed out at Contrition. "I should have known better than to listen to you!"

Justin Odets looked as if he were going to cry. Contrition had never felt more like crying in her life. Not only was Zeus going to be disqualified but Lotta and Vangie and Mr. Yeats and Mr. Tibbs had trusted her, to say nothing of her having to kiss her own Albany

fund, what there was of it, goodbye. They were being pawked, dunkled, slubbered!

She couldn't bear it. Before she had time to think about the audacity of her actions, she was sprinting toward Justin's buggy. Dressed as a boy, with her short hair and her experience at playing the part of a boy, she could do it if she only got to it before she had a chance to change her mind.

"Get down out of that buggy!" she snapped at Justin.

Justin gawked at her, his eyes goggling. "Who the devil are you?"

"I'm Dianna Laverne, you dolt! Zeus knows me even if you don't! Now get down out of that buggy!"

Dazed, too flabbergasted to think, Justin obeyed her.

As quick as a flash, Contrition took his place. Her hands on the ribbons were sure and competent. Zeus stopped his prancing. Zeus stopped his sidestepping. Zeus pricked his ears forward and got ready to trot.

Never in her life had Contrition dreamed of anything like this. The flashing, pounding hooves, the wheels turning too fast for the eye to follow, the wind in her face, the strength and will and heart of Zeus flowing back through the ribbons to her fingertips and her strength and will and heart flowing back to him. Zeus trotted. He laid into it, and he trotted like no horse had ever trotted before.

Dimly, she heard the crowd shouting and cheering, she heard pandemonium break out as Zeus took the lead and stayed there, as Zeus left the other entries behind. She didn't care about that, she didn't even care about winning any more, she only knew that if she'd had her druthers, she'd druther spend all the rest of her life right where she was now, with her hands on the ribbons while Zeus showed what he was made of.

She was rich. She had nearly a hundred and fifteen dollars! The outsider, the horse nobody had ever heard of, had brought in five to one.

And that was only what she had from Zeus's having shown his heels to King Midas, to John's Toby and to Apple Cider. Because here was Mr. Justin Odets, beside himself with joy, drunk with joy

rather than from what he'd imbibed as he was congratulated and backslapped in the common room of the inn, thrusting half of his own winnings into her hands and closing them over the money and telling her that she had to keep it, it was only fair, because if she hadn't driven Zeus, Zeus wouldn't even have got to race.

Justin Odets had bet fifty dollars and, with the odds five to one, he'd won two hundred and fifty dollars, and one hundred and twenty-five of it was hers, and altogether she had almost two hundred and forty dollars.

It didn't seem right to let Mr. Odets give her half his winnings, but Mr. Yeats told her to accept it because Mr. Odets was right, they would all have lost their shirts if she hadn't taken Mr. Odets's place at the ribbons. Anton and Dolly told her to accept it, Vangie and Lotta told her to accept it, Mr. Tibbs told her to accept it, and they couldn't all be wrong.

Henry didn't tell her anything because he wasn't there. But Contrition was certainly looking forward to seeing his face when he found out what she'd done and how rich she was. This would show him, darn him!

Justin still couldn't get over how Contrition had played the part of a boy with such conviction that not a spectator at the race, outside the members of the troupe and himself, had any inkling that she was a girl. It was a good thing that nobody knew because it was entirely possible that Zeus would still be declared disqualified if it should get abroad that the driver had been a female.

Justin's regard and admiration for Contrition had doubled and tripled. He looked at Contrition as though she were a combination of an angel come down from heaven and Father Christmas. His heart was in his eyes, and if there had been a handy mud puddle around, he would have been quick to remove his jacket and lay it across the bog so that Contrition could trip across it with her dainty feet.

Evangeline was barely able to conceal her pique. She'd changed into her best dress and piled up her hair in elaborate curls before she'd joined the celebration in the common room, clearly bent on making a conquest. Every time she moved, the scent of her provocative perfume filled the air. When Contrition moved, she smelled of horse, because she'd hugged Zeus as hard as she could when he'd

crossed the finish line four buggy lengths ahead of King Midas, who had up until today been the champion of six counties.

Contrition didn't care that she smelled of horse. The smell of any horse that trotted like Zeus was a beautiful smell. Furthermore, Mr. Odets seemed to think so too. On top of her elation over having driven Zeus to the win and in anticipating her coming triumph over Henry when he learned of her exploit and how rich she was, she had the additional satisfaction of having Vangie jealous of her. This was, beyond any doubt, the highest point of her life to date.

To their gratification, the Olympians' performance the next evening was well received. A good many of the patrons having lost considerable sums of money on the race, they were in the mood to have their spirits lifted, and the cost of a ticket to watch the Olympians perform was negligible enough so that they wouldn't miss it. Besides, a good many of their wives were put out because of the lost money, and it behooved them to mollify their wives by taking them to a play.

Evangeline outdid herself, posturing and emoting fair to bring tears to the eye; whenever she had the chance, and sometimes when she didn't, she looked at Justin to calculate how devastating her performance was to his admiring eyes. By a great effort of will and discipline she managed to conceal her chagrin when Justin's eyes were all for Contrition. Their success going to their heads, only Henry noticed Justin stiffen, staring at him during one of his scenes.

Damn! Henry thought. He's recognized me, there's no doubt of it, in spite of his wig and costume that had always served to keep his identity a secret before. Of all the rotten luck, why did Justin Odets, young social lion from Albany, have to turn up in Palmyra, at this inn?

There was no doubt in the world that Justin knew who he was. They'd gone to Union College in Schenectady together, Justin had been among Henry's most intimate friends. Justin and Leon and Henry had indulged in escapades together that had all but had them invited to leave that hall of learning under clouds of disgrace. Justin and Leon and Henry had shared too many evenings of whist and ale together for Justin to have any doubts at all.

Grimly, Henry went on with his part. The play must go on. But if

he had a modicum of sense in his head, he'd take to his heels the moment it was over and disappear so completely that nobody, much less Justin, would have a prayer of finding him.

Unfortunately, Henry had no such luck. The applause was scarcely over after their last curtain call before Justin came charging toward him, grasping his arm.

"Hist!" Justin said, in what he supposed to be a whisper calculated to reach no further than Henry's ears. "So this is where you've been all this time!"

Henry dragged Justin aside. "This is where I've been. You ass, I ought to bash your teeth in for charging at me like that, attracting attention to me!"

"Well, you ought to be glad it was me who found you and not somebody else! I knew all along that you were too smart to be caught, but who'd ever think that you'd hide right in plain sight, on the stage? It's brilliant, Henry!"

Henry wasn't in the mood for flattery. "Justin, have you heard any news of Leon?"

"Certainly I've had news of Leon. He's written to me," Justin said.

"Well? Do I have to drag it out of you, word by word? Where is he? Damn it, I've got to get him back here to testify that I couldn't have killed Flora Baldwin."

"That Leon!" Justin shook his head admiringly. "He's had at least a dozen affairs since he landed over there on the other side of the ocean. One right after another, you know Leon. And every time, he's hightailed it just in the nick of time before his sins caught up with him, and the young ladies' fathers and brothers, with wedding rings in hand and blushing brides waiting in the wings, as you in the theatre would say, latched onto his coat collar and hauled him to the altar."

"Damnit, Jus, where is he? Is he coming home, and how soon?"

"Not as far as I know. He's having much too jolly a time flitting from one young lady to another. He wrote to me from France but he was about to leave for Spain, instructing me that the young ladies of Spain are reputed to be the most beautiful in the world and he could hardly wait to get there. They all have duennas, you know, and he

was looking forward to the challenge of getting past them and laying waste to all the young señoritas' hearts. I don't see how he manages to do it. I never had that much success with young ladies, myself. I guess I'm just not a very romantic figure of a man. Leon always was the good-looking one, with all the girls pining after him."

Henry's heart sank. Leave it to Leon to make sure that nobody knew where he was at any given time! At this rate, Henry would be a graybeard before Leon tired of his fun and decided to come home.

Justin was tired of talking about Leon, whom he envied not for the fortune he'd inherited, but for his success with young ladies. He wanted to talk about Zeus and Contrition, not necessarily in that order.

"That young lady in your troupe. Miss Laverne. Isn't she wonderful? I can't get over her. All that talent with horses and as pretty as a picture to boot! I've never been this taken with a young lady before, and I'll be the first one to admit it. You're a lucky devil to be in her company day in and day out! If it wasn't for Zeus, I'd be tempted to throw in my lot with you Olympians and see if I could become a passable thespian, just for the pleasure of her company."

"You wouldn't like it. It isn't as glamorous as it seems. Sometimes we're hungry, and a lot of the time we're tired, and sometimes we don't have any place to sleep but in some campground."

"You seem to have survived it admirably. If you can do it, so could I. Do you think that Mr. Burnside would take me on?"

"Mr. Burnside would take on a three-legged donkey if the donkey had the twenty dollars to pay over for the season."

"Only twenty dollars?" Justin seemed to be pondering the opportunity as though his life depended on it. He beamed before his face fell. "But then what would I do with Zeus?" he asked plaintively.

"That's right. You have to think of Zeus. You can hardly give up racing him to sure wins just because of a passing notion that you might like to become an actor. Besides, I've already told you that you wouldn't like the life."

"But there's Miss Laverne." Justin's voice was more plaintive than ever. "And besides, without her to drive for me, maybe Zeus will never win again. He hates me."

Henry clapped him on the shoulder. "Go and be the jolly host. They'll all be waiting for you in the common room."

"Aren't you coming?" Justin's face fell.

"It's better for me not to be seen any more than I have to be, behind the footlights, well disguised," Henry explained. "I'm a fugitive, remember. Have a drink or two for me, Jus. I'm off to the campsite."

"That's rotten luck, when the rest of us will be having such a good time. I know. Just tell me where you're camped, and I'll bring you a bottle and some victuals after we're through here."

"After you're through here, you won't be in any condition to drive."

"That's no problem. I'll ask Miss Laverne to drive me."

"Thanks just the same, but I'd be sound asleep before you got there. And I don't drink any more, Jus. You wouldn't, either, if what happened to me had happened to you. Keep your wits about you and don't go blacking out in some corner so you have no alibi when somebody sees fit to charge you with murder."

"You didn't do it, of course." It never occurred to Justin to ask Henry if he had done it. His face was the picture of sympathy.

"Of course I didn't do it! But there are witnesses to place me with the unfortunate victim at the time she was done in, and without Leon I don't have a prayer of proving my innocence. Apparently the man who was seen leaving Miss Baldwin's house, after I'd been seen leaving the hotel with her, was of my general build and coloring, and you know how stubborn witnesses are about swearing that they couldn't have made a mistake. But don't worry about it. Leon's bound to come home sometime, and until then, I'm well enough where I am."

"Maybe I'll give Mr. Burnside the twenty dollars to take me on," Justin said. "Then if you're recognized, I'll be here to help you fight the constables off when they come to get you."

"You're as asinine as you were when we were pinklings. Go on, Jus. Have a good time. And look, when you get home, do you suppose you could get over to Schenectady and tell my father that you've seen me and that I'm all right? We don't dare to get in touch with each other very often, in case his house is being watched. And

any messenger might be followed; only Eli can get away with sneaking off, pretending he's on a drunk."

"Of course I will! But I won't be going home for some time. I want to race Zeus some more."

"Then you'd better learn to handle him."

"Yes, I had better, hadn't I?" Justin pondered this problem for a moment, until once again his face brightened. "I have it! I'll throw myself on Miss Laverne's mercy and ask her to teach me how to handle him!"

"I wish you luck," Henry said. A moment later Henry was gone, with Justin looking around distractedly wondering how his friend could have disappeared so suddenly. Another minute later, he had dismissed the puzzle as he sought out the delightful Miss Laverne.

"You've got to let him know who's the horse and who's the master," Contrition told him a short while later, while Justin ate her up with adoring eyes. "You're the master; he's supposed to do what you want. But if you can't make him see that, you'll never get him to behave."

"I don't want to whip him. I don't think I could do it," Justin said.

Contrition's smile transformed her face, making her even more enchantingly lovely than Justin had thought she was. She could never have a high opinion of a man who would whip a horse, and, as she liked Justin, she was mightily glad that he didn't think he could do it.

"It's a good thing you couldn't do it. I have an idea that if you tried whipping Zeus, he'd be the last horse you'd ever try to whip. He has to like you as well as know you're the master. He has to have confidence in you, and a horse can't have confidence in anyone who whips him. Don't worry about it, Mr. Odets. I'll have plenty of time to teach you how to handle him tomorrow because we're going to play here again tomorrow night."

"I don't think Zeus will ever like me," Justin said, his eyes looking bewildered and hurt. "I can't for the life of me think why. Dogs like me."

"If dogs like you, then we can get Zeus to like you, too," Contrition assured him. She'd been careful not to drink much of a

spirituous nature while they had the supper Justin had promised them, but her triumphs of the day had gone to her head worse than cider or wine. It felt as though it were spinning. She'd best get on up to bed if she was going to get up bright and early in the morning to give Mr. Odets his first lesson in how to handle Zeus.

Justin was crestfallen when she made her excuses and left the party. Evangeline was elated because with Contrition out of the way, she had a chance to impress Mr. Odets with her own far-superior beauty and wit. Of course Mr. Odets was a bit young, but then Evangeline looked years younger than her actual age and so the difference in years really didn't matter. To have Mr. Justin Odets worshipping her at her feet would be a conquest indeed! He might give her a testimonial!

Lotta, who had eaten too much after remembering all the times in her life she'd gone to bed hungry, was a little sick to her stomach, and she also excused herself, leaving Evangeline with a clear field.

But Justin, alas, was oblivious to Evangeline's charms, even as he was being charming to her, as a host should be to a lady guest. Justin's taste never had run to colorful and overripe ladies. As a matter of fact, Justin was so naturally bashful in the presence of the opposite sex that his amorous experiences had been all but nil. Not quite sure of how to extricate himself from Evangeline's attentions, he smiled and nodded and wished that she would pick on somebody more her own age.

Upstairs, Lotta, feeling a little better, decided that Contrition's hair needed to be clipped a little shorter. It grew so fast that they could hardly keep up with it. The scissors flashed in the candlelight, and Contrition winced and protested.

"You're going to make me as bald as a newborn baby!"

"No, I'm not. There! Now I'll roll it up in rags for you." Lotta's fingers were deft as she rolled the strands tight to Contrition's scalp. "If you're going to go around driving in trotting races, we've got to keep you looking like a boy!"

On the far side of the bed, with Lotta beside her, leaving the near side for Vangie whenever she could tear herself away from her adoring audience in the common room, Contrition lay awake dreaming

of how soon now she'd have enough money to get to Albany and bring her father to ruin. That would show Mr. Henry Davenport.

9

By noon of the next day, Contrition had come to the conclusion that if bringing her natural father to ruin were as hard as teaching Justin Odets to handle Zeus, she'd have her work cut out for her when she got to Albany. It wasn't that Justin was stupid or lacking in natural aptitude in handling horses. It was simply that Justin and Zeus just didn't get along.

"When you tell him to back up between the shafts, for tunket's sake sound as if you expect him to do it!" Contrition said, her exasperation showing in the tone of her voice. "If you don't sound as if you know he's going to mind you, he'll get the notion that he doesn't have to."

"But I don't expect him to mind me! He never has yet, so why should I?" Justin wanted to know, quite reasonably.

Contrition called on the last reserves of her patience. "Try it again. Just take hold of his bridle and guide him back as if you meant it!"

Justin tried again. This time Zeus backed up with only a little head-tossing and side-stepping. "That's better. Now when you're driving, hold him good and steady. Let him feel that you've got him. It'll give him confidence."

"He already has all the confidence he needs. I'm the one who hasn't," Justin said dolefully.

"How do you expect him ever to mind you if you go on thinking and talking like that? He can feel that you're not sure of

yourself right down through those ribbons. Firm hands, Mr. Odets, firm!"

The lesson didn't go well. Contrition hoped that the afternoon lesson would go better. It didn't help matters that various members of the troupe wandered out into the innyard to see how things were going, and that various hostlers and a few arriving or departing gentlemen guests regarded the proceedings with interest and no little amusement.

Justin took his noon meal with the troupe. Evangeline was dressed and coiffed to kill, and her flutterings and posturings were downright sickening. She's looking at him as if she'd like to eat him for dessert, Contrition thought. If she were in Justin's shoes, she'd run for her life.

She wasn't prepared to admit to herself that part of her pique was because Vangie looked devastating in light mauve, fresh and scented from a sponge bath, while she herself was overheated and smelly in her boy's clothing.

"It's a lucky thing for me that Miss Laverne took the notion to attend the race dressed in that stage costume," Justin said. "But I can't understand why she did it. It's rather less than usual for a young lady to go out in public dressed as a boy. I can understand why she's dressed as a boy this morning; it's easier for her to handle Zeus without being encumbered with skirts. But I can't understand why she went to the race dressed like that."

The members of the troupe glanced at each other, but by tacit agreement none of them ventured to explain that Contrition was obliged to go about in disguise because she was a wanted runaway. Her name and description were still posted on inn hoardings along their route, and it was obvious that Amos Reeves hadn't given up his search for her. As a matter of frightening fact, he'd raised the reward from five to seven dollars, making it all the more necessary that she keep her true identity hidden.

The Olympians all liked Justin, but he was an outsider, not of the theatre, and therefore not to be trusted. Besides, with the exception of Evangeline, who would have liked to snare Justin's attentions for herself, and Gavin, who didn't care one way or the other, all of them hoped that the wealthy and agreeable young gentleman's interest

would grow. Although it was unusual, still there had been romances between actresses and gentlemen, romances that had led to honorable marriage. They'd hoped that Contrition and Henry would hit it off, but it was obvious that they hadn't, and in that case, Mr. Justin Odets was an even better match for their Dianna. Even Evangeline's loyalty to theatrical people kept her silent although she chaffed at the restriction. If Mr. Justin Odets knew that Contrition was nothing but an ignorant farm girl, he'd lose his interest in her soon enough!

"It was just a prank," Dolly said. "She thought she'd be more comfortable in the boy's clothing, and save getting her dress dusty. Our Dianna's high-spirited, Mr. Odets, but she's a lady for all that."

"She certainly is!" Justin's smile was positively beaming as he regarded Contrition with adoring eyes. "She's a most unusual young lady, but anyone can see that she's a lady no matter what she chooses to wear. And I expect that theatrical people aren't obliged to abide by all the social conventions."

He felt like kicking himself the moment the words were out of his mouth. He'd sounded pompous and stuffy; he didn't know any more about young ladies than he knew about horses. He was, to put it bluntly, totally inadequate.

"Dianna can bend the conventions a little, seeing that she's only a child," Evangeline murmured with an indulgent smile. "I assure you that the adult members of our troupe are conventional in the extreme, Mr. Odets."

"I-I'm sure you are. Cer-certainly you are!" Justin stammered. He didn't know any more about theatrical people than he knew about horses and young ladies, and he hoped that he hadn't said anything to offend them. Dolly beamed at him and Lotta's eyes were dreamy as she regarded first Justin and then Contrition. Mr. Justin Odets was just the nicest young gentleman she'd ever known, and wouldn't it be wonderful if something came of it between him and Dianna!

Of course there would be objections. Mr. Odets' family would raise all sorts of obstacles if Mr. Odets were to fall in love with their Dianna and want to make her his wife. Being an actress was enough in itself to put her beyond the pale of conventional society, and being a bastard, which Mr. Odets's family would be sure to find out, would make a union between them all but impossible. Still, Dianna was a sweet girl,

and she was pure, all of them could attest to that, and it wasn't her fault that she was a bastard, and Mr. Odets was such a nice young man that he just might find a way. True love, after all, recognizes no obstacles.

Contribution swallowed the dregs of coffee in her cup and looked at Justin. "We'd better be getting to our afternoon lesson if you're up to it. From where I'm standing, it looks as if you'll be needing all the lessons I have time to give you!"

Evangeline purred with delight. Of all the speeches calculated to turn a young man's fancy away from a young lady, this was the prize! Implying that Justin was less than perfect, implying that she was more adept at *anything* than he was! Evangeline herself would never have made such a mistake. Flattery was what gentlemen thrived on, admiration was what they craved, and never, never, the implication that a lady could equal or surpass a gentleman at anything!

If that were the case, it passed right over Justin's head. "Don't I know it!" he sighed. "But I'll do better this afternoon. There's no way I could do any worse!" Evangeline fought down her alarm. Justin's response only proved that he didn't think of Contribution as a young lady at all but as a child, and a child more boy than girl at that.

"Then we'll get at it as soon as our stomachs have settled," Contribution said. There! Evangeline thought, even further relieved. Imagine saying anything as indelicate as giving your stomach time to settle! Dianna was impossible, she'd never be anything but a farmhussy. Anton and Dolly and Mr. Yeats were wasting their time trying to fashion her into anything but what she was. She'd never be a passable actress, much less a passable lady!

Justin did do better that afternoon. He managed to back Zeus between the shafts at the first try. Even his hands on the ribbons were more confident. There was just one trouble. Zeus trotted for Justin, but Zeus didn't trot nearly as fast for Justin as he did for Contribution.

Justin was dejected. "It's no use, Miss Laverne. He just doesn't like me as well as he likes you."

"Never mind. He's getting used to you." Contribution was cheerful

because it was her nature to be cheerful and, after all, Justin was doing better. "Just keep on practicing and you'll get the hang of it in no time."

That evening, Justin was once again the most appreciative member of the audience. He stood and applauded until his hands smarted at Contrition's small part in Henry's burletta, *Matthew's First Love*, a risible farce concerning a middle-aged gentleman who had wed a middle-aged lady but who persisted in mourning for the loss of a certain Prudence, to his bride's jealous consternation. Contrition played the gentleman's young nephew, and at the end, the nephew burst onto the stage with the joyous announcement that Prudence had been found, alive and well and ready to return to the gentleman.

"And she's a mother!" Contrition declaimed, cavorting about the stage. And she crowed, with delicious delight, "Three boys and two girls!" Whereupon the middle-aged bride swooned, right on top of Contrition, and they both went down in a heap. It was an exacting part, as Dolly's bulk was not inconsiderable, and Contrition had to take care not to be squashed.

Prudence, it turned out, was an Irish Setter; the pride of the bridegroom's heart, she had run away and only now been found. The audience, starved for amusement, loved it. Justin thought that Henry was a genius for having written it, and he was convinced that Contrition was the greatest actress ever to tread the boards.

"It's garbage," Henry informed him after the performance, before he once more headed for the camping place where he watched over the Conniewagons and the horses and kept himself well out of the sight of anyone who might recognize him. "Mildly amusing, I grant you, but garbage all the same. I have to do something to earn my keep, so I help out by writing those silly little pieces to round out the programs."

"But Henry, your playlet is really fine! And Miss Laverne is enchanting as the nephew! You must have written the part especially for her."

Henry acknowledged that he had. "She has to earn her keep as well as I do," he said. "Not that she isn't handy at anything she sets her hand to; she's been invaluable to us. But she has a notion that

she'd like to become an actress, so someone has to come up with parts for her that she can handle."

"Henry, is there anything between you and Miss Laverne? I mean, are you fond of her, or anything of the sort?"

"Don't be a bigger ass than you already are!" Henry's voice was testy. "She's only a little girl!"

"Well, she looks like a little girl, sometimes, because she's so small, but I don't think she's really a little girl. She's actually a very attractive young lady." Justin all but stammered, his face showing a definite flush.

It was just as well, Henry thought, that Justin and the Olympians would part company the following day. Justin was acting the smitten young swain, and knowing, as Henry did, that nothing could come of it because of their incompatible backgrounds, Henry would be glad to bid his friend goodbye before either Justin or Contrition got hurt. He'd be damned if he'd admit that there was any trace of jealousy in his desire to see Justin's back as he drove Zeus out of the innyard and out of their lives.

Contrition reached the innyard a moment after Justin did the next morning, and she stopped in her tracks, shaking her head with pained disbelief. Justin, determined to make Zeus like him, was feeding the beautiful trotter lumps of sugar he'd filched from the table.

"No, no, no!" Contrition cried, her voice filled with exasperation. "You mustn't give him treats before you work with him! If you do, he'll be turning his head all the time to see if he's going to get any more! Treats are all right but they should be given after he's done his work, as a reward for being good. And an apple or a carrot is better for him than sugar."

"He likes sugar better," Justin defended himself. "And besides, once when I tried to feed him an apple, he bit me."

"I'll bet you didn't break it in two," Contrition accused him. "You have to break an apple in two and give him one half at a time because it's hard for a horse to bite into a whole apple. He most likely bit you because you were stupid. I'll show you how to do it after we've worked him, if you haven't ruined everything with that stupid sugar."

"My dear child, sugar is not stupid. The person proffering the sugar may or may not be stupid, but sugar has no mental powers," Jonathan Yeats chided her from behind her shoulder.

"You're a nitpicker!" Contrition accused the venerable actor. "Always picking, picking, picking at everything I say!"

"But you must learn, you have expressed a desire to learn, and the correct usage of the English language is one of the most important things you must learn if you are to achieve success in life."

"Drat success in life! Right now all I want to do is teach Mr. Odets how to drive that horse, if he's through feeding it that stupid sugar!"

"I'm sorry," Justin apologized. "I thought it was a good idea."

"Well, it wasn't!" Contrition snapped. "Let's get on with it, Mr. Odets. Remember, you've got to . . . you have to be confident." She directed a sideways look at Jonathan, triumphant because she'd remembered to say it right. "If you're confident, you know Zeus is going to do what you want."

"I know it, but I'm afraid he doesn't," Justin said plaintively.

"Get up in that buggy. Now take the ribbons and let him know that he's going to trot the way he ought to trot!"

Zeus trotted, but far from as fast as he'd trotted for Contrition in the race, or even around the stable yard. He moved beautifully; he was a vision to stir any horse-lover's heart. He just didn't trot fast enough to win any trotting races.

"It's no use," Justin mourned, pulling Zeus to a stop. "Or maybe he just doesn't feel well today. Maybe the stupid sugar upset his stomach."

He climbed down and Contrition climbed up. Zeus would have shown his heels to any competition as she drove him. Justin was so dejected that he considered selling his beloved trotter and giving up any idea of winning future glory with him. He could hardly enjoy his breakfast when he and Contrition went inside, although Contrition tucked into hers as though she hadn't eaten for a week. It wasn't every morning that she had a breakfast like this, without having to cook it, without having to stir up the campfire before she could cook it, and without having to scour the countryside the night before in

search of a henhouse to raid. The best part of it was the Olympians could pay for it; they wouldn't have to sneak out of town like felons, looking back over their shoulders for fear a constable was hot on their trail.

"Mr. Odets, do you mind if I ask you a question? Whatever made you buy Zeus in the first place, knowing that you aren't any great shucks as a driver?" Contrition wanted to know.

Evangeline smirked. There Dianna went again, saying exactly the wrong thing to a gentleman. If she kept on at this rate, Mr. Odets would heartily dislike her.

"I didn't buy him," Justin said. "I won him."

"Won him? Now how on earth did you do that?"

"Well, I'm not much of a gambler. I'm not much better at playing cards than I am at driving trotters. But I was invited to spend a week on a party boat; on the canal, you know, and in one of the towns where we stopped there was this gentleman who wanted to play whist with us. For some reason, I started winning and I kept on winning, and about three o'clock in the morning, the gentleman made a very large bet, thinking that my luck couldn't hold, but it did. He couldn't pay me, and he offered me Zeus in payment."

Justin looked unhappy. "I tried to tell him that it was all right, that it was just a friendly game and that if he didn't have the money I wouldn't press him for it, but he became quite huffy and said that he paid his gambling debts. He insisted that we go to the livery stable right then so I could see Zeus, and when I saw Zeus I knew I had to have him. I didn't like for the gentleman to lose him, but as long as he insisted, well, after all, I had won him fair and square. I'd tried to make the gentleman stop playing but he wouldn't. I quit the party boat right there and began hunting for races. It wasn't hard to find men who wanted to test their trotters against Zeus, only Zeus wouldn't trot for me. Sometimes he wouldn't even let me hitch him up. He hates me."

"He doesn't hate you any more. Likely it's just because you're a new master and he isn't used to you yet, but he's beginning to like you."

"I think he is too. He just won't trot fast for me. And my father's going to be furious when I get home because I was supposed to be

home two weeks ago and he doesn't approve of gambling. I thought if I won a whole batch of races he might not be quite so angry because he likes trotters. But I've only won one race and I didn't really win that, you did."

"Zeus won it. It's not his fault that you can't handle him. I'm sure you'll be able to get a good price for him. If you get a real good price maybe your father won't be so angry." She looked at Jonathan, grinning at his nod of approval. She hadn't said mad instead of angry.

"But I don't want to sell him! I like him."

"Then keep him," Evangeline said with her sweetest and most admiring smile. "With an animal like that, you'll be the envy of every Corinthian in Albany, and all of the young ladies will be eager to accompany you on drives. You'll become the most popular young gentleman in Albany, if you aren't already."

"No, I'm not. And it'd be just my luck to have him act up on me and make a fool of me in front of everybody, and then I'd be a laughingstock."

"Why, my dear Mr. Odets, that would never happen! Any young lady would be proud to have you for her escort!" Evangeline's expression was as flattering as her words. Watching, Contrition felt slightly nauseous. She was also hatching an idea.

She'd won a hundred dollars in that race, not counting what Justin had insisted on giving her out of his own winnings. She could go on being an actress for years before she accumulated enough money to carry out her plans to get to Albany and bring her father to ruin, but if she could drive in a few more races, the amount of money she could make was mind-boggling.

"I know what we can do! I'll just go along with you, and whenever you can arrange a race, I'll do the driving, and then we'll be sure to win!"

Shocked silence fell around the table, and then Dolly gasped with horror.

"Dianna! You're a young *lady*! You can do no such thing! It wouldn't be decent for you to travel with a young gentleman!"

"Why wouldn't it? I'd be dressed as a boy and nobody'd know the difference."

"You'd still be a young female!" Dolly endeavored to make her understand. "And decent, respectable young females just simply do not go bogieing around the country in the company of young gentlemen!"

"But think of all that lovely money we'd win!" Contrition protested. There certainly were a mort of rules in the world, and a lot of them didn't make a particle of sense.

"I'm sorry, Miss Laverne. I'm afraid that Mrs. Burnside is right. It wouldn't do at all. Your reputation would be shattered if we were ever found out, even though I am sure that everyone here knows that you would be in no danger from me."

Deflated, Contrition went back to thinking. There had to be some way out of the dilemma of remaining a respectable young lady and still winning money racing Zeus.

"I have it! Mr. Odets can travel along with us! He'll be bound to be able to set up some races along the way, and whenever he does, I'll just do the driving for him. We won't get as rich as we would if we went alone, but we'll get a lot richer than we would if we didn't get to race Zeus at all!"

"Dianna, you're so clever!" Lotta clasped her hands, her eyes alight with admiration.

"She isn't so clever. I thought of it before she did, I just didn't bother telling because I don't give a hang if Zeus wins any races or not." Jody spoke up from the foot of the table where he'd been a disgusted listener to the conversations that went on around him. "Trotting races aren't moral. My father doesn't like them, and he's always right."

"Your father is a smug, highty-tighty prig." Evangeline glared at him. She wasn't happy at having Mr. Odets reminded that she was the mother of a six-year-old son, much less such a disagreeable one as Jody was. "Now be quiet. Children should be seen but not heard." If she'd had her way, she'd rather that Jody didn't have to be seen at all when there were gentlemen present who admired her.

"Not when they're smarter than grownups, they shouldn't!" Jody said, glaring right back at her.

"Jody most likely did think of it, he's real smart," Contrition said. Maybe Jody was obnoxious, but he was smart. "And if he

thought of it too, that shows that it's a good idea. The both of us couldn't be wrong!"

"If you please! Your grammar, Miss Laverne, your grammar!" Jonathan Yeats mourned. All the same, his face had brightened. Jonathan liked winning money as much as the next man, and from what he'd seen of Zeus, the trotter was a sure thing.

"I'm not at all sure that it's a good idea," Gavin Hurley objected. "This is a theatrical troupe, we're not in the horseracing business." Gavin was far from eager to have Justin's company on a steady basis because Justin took all the attention away from him.

It followed immediately that because Gavin was against it, Evangeline was for it. She would have been for it just because Gavin was against it, even if she wasn't as eager for Justin's continued company as Gavin was to avoid it.

"It's the perfect solution!" Evangeline cried. "Of course he must travel with us!"

Anton looked at Justin doubtfully. "Have you had any experience at acting?" he asked. "We could use another man in the troupe; we're sadly inadequate as to cast for most of our plays."

"No, I haven't, but I expect I could learn." Justin's eyes lighted up, and his voice was eager. "And I'll be more than happy to pay the twenty dollars Henry told me is customary for you to ask for taking an amateur on. And of course I'll give Miss Laverne half of my winnings—it's only fair as she'll be the one who does the driving."

Half of Mr. Odets' winnings as well as all of her own! Contrition had visions of becoming a wealthy young woman overnight. "Say yes, do!" she begged Anton. "We'll all help Mr. Odets learn his lines. Acting isn't all that hard!"

"Acting, my dear Miss Laverne, is something that takes years to perfect, even when one has a natural talent for it," Gavin told her coldly. "It entails a great deal more than just the learning of lines."

"You'd ought to know 'cause you can learn your lines but you can't act your way out of a paper sack!" Jody told him. Gavin didn't deign to answer him, contenting himself with giving Jody a look calculated to strike him dumb.

Visions of sudden wealth prevailed. Gavin was outvoted. Justin

would join the troupe, learning and playing such parts as he could master, and in the meantime scaring up races that Dianna was sure to win to the enrichment of them all. Except for Gavin, they were all delighted.

And except for Henry. Henry felt like strangling Justin for having crossed their path, and Contrition for winning that race for him. For one thing, having a horse like Zeus with them, and winning races to boot, would attract far too much attention, a danger not only to Contrition but to himself.

For another thing, Justin was far too taken with Contrition to suit Henry. But Henry, himself a lowly fugitive from justice, was here only on the Olympians' sufferance, and had nothing to say about it. Justin Odets was now a full-fledged member of the troupe, and Henry could only hope that no disaster would result from it.

Even if Contrition weren't recognized and taken, even if she didn't break her heart over Justin, there was a third possibility—once Contrition had won enough money to carry out her determination to go to Albany and confront her natural father, John Haywood would destroy her, quickly and without compassion. Somehow, he'd have to find a way to talk her out of it . . . and Contrition was beyond any doubt the most stubborn human being he'd ever known.

Mulling it over, Henry was not happy. Damn it, where was Leon? The only way he could be sure to prevent Contrition from bringing ruin down on her own head instead of her father's was for Henry to marry her himself, and he couldn't do that, or as much as ask her, until Leon was found and dragged back to the United States and had exonerated him of Miss Flora Baldwin's murder.

As an actor, Justin left a great deal to be desired. Set to play the part of an amorous young gentleman, he flushed and stammered and behaved altogether like a schoolboy smitten with his first love rather than a suave Romeo. Set to portraying a villain, he came across as a mild-mannered, softhearted young man who couldn't harm a fly. Put a spear in his hand and he tripped over it, much to the raucous amusement of the audience. He didn't have any trouble learning his lines. Like Contrition, he was a quick study. He simply could not act.

Still, the troupe needed him. In a pinch, he could be set to play two or three small parts in the same play, darting offstage and onstage and changing costume so swiftly that Anton and Jonathan marveled at it. And he came in handy helping with the stage sets whenever Henry spotted anyone who might recognize him and had to keep out of sight except in whatever disguise his parts called for. Justin had no aversion to hard physical work; in fact, he was so eager to make himself useful that he was under everyone's feet.

"I'm hopeless!" Justin mourned to Contrition as they worked Zeus out to keep him in top condition. "I only wonder why Mr. Burnside hasn't told me to get in my buggy and disappear."

"Well, you come in handy." Contrition was honest; she wasn't going to tell him he was good when he was awful. "You help dress the stage when we're short. And you aren't here to act, you're here to win races."

"I wasn't so bad as Salerio, the messenger in *The Merchant of Venice* last night, though, was I?"

"You said your lines all right, but you weren't supposed to trip over your own feet and almost knock Gavin down when you said them."

"Well, I was in a hurry to get off the stage before I did something even worse." Justin's voice was so plaintive that Contrition had to laugh. "And as for the races, I haven't found any yet, so there doesn't seem to be any point to my staying with the company at all."

"You paid your twenty dollars. Mr. Burnside wouldn't like to have to give it back to you."

"He wouldn't have to give it back. He's kept his part of the bargain, letting me set foot on stage at all."

"For mercy's sake, stop feeling sorry for yourself! We'll be playing bigger towns soon, and there are bound to be gentlemen who'll want to try their trotters against Zeus."

Justin's admiration of her was almost embarrassing, except that Contrition was used to it by now. He hung on to her every word as though she were the Oracle of Delphi. Contrition knew all about her because Jonathan was instructing her in Greek and Roman mythology, as well as in everything else he could think of, determined that

her education should be well-rounded. She'd turn into a toploftical bluestocking if he didn't stop stuffing facts in her head.

"Why, I think that that's probably right! I can certainly try harder." Crestfallen for a moment, Justin added, "What do you think I can do to foster these races?"

"The Lord helps them who help themselves," Contrition said, but she set herself to thinking, and as usual, she came up with an idea.

"Races aren't going to fall in your lap. What you need to do is drive Zeus through the towns, letting everybody see him. And then do a lot of talking in taverns and inns, allowing that Zeus can beat any other horse in the state. Somebody's bound to want to put it to the test."

Having supreme confidence in anything Contrition suggested, Justin put her idea into practice. They groomed Zeus until he looked like the champion they knew he was, and as the company wound its way from hamlet to village to prosperous town, he would drive the trotter down the main streets and then stop where gentlemen congregated, where he would bemoan the fact that he couldn't find anyone with the courage to race him.

Gentlemen with the means to have fine trotters of their own being what they were, they looked Zeus over and then asked Justin to put his money where his mouth was.

"I don't drive Zeus myself, you understand. I have a lad who drives for me." Justin felt compelled to be honest, both because he was basically honest to begin with and because he wanted no objections about a switch in drivers when the races began. "My boy is a genius at the ribbons. I'd back him against any driver in the country."

A lad, a mere boy, set up against experienced gentlemen drivers? There wasn't a gentleman in evidence who would believe that a boy could outdrive them.

Bets were placed, the sites of the races determined, and crowds gathered. Seeing the tender age and slight form of the lad who was Justin's driver, the bets flew fast, doubling and redoubling. The general consensus of opinion was that it hardly seemed fair to take Justin's money, wagered against a pinkling who wasn't even dry behind the ears. Justin's own innocent and naive appearance and

manner strengthened their opinion. Tapping Justin's kick would be as easy as taking candy from a baby.

Justin beamed with delight and Contrition gloated as she counted up her winnings when the overconfident gentlemen were obliged to pay off when Zeus showed their trotters his heels. Evangeline was in her glory, wagering small sums herself and coming out ahead so that she could add to her wardrobe, and in her element as she mingled with the gentlemen who looked at her with such admiration in her new finery.

Lotta, so confident that Zeus and Contrition couldn't lose, wagered larger sums, none of which she spent on herself, but tucked away in a stocking. Every member of the troupe profited as the towns and villages fell victim to Zeus's prowess and as word of the exceptional trotter preceded them, inspiring other gentlemen to bring the upstart horse and the upstart milkling down a peg. Only Henry abstained from betting and brooded and sulked, convinced that no good could come from it.

Inevitably, the reputation of Zeus and his young driver grew to such proportions that the amount of the wagers fell off and the profits diminished, but there were still profits substantial enough to make the venture more than worthwhile. There were always a few gentlemen and enough champions of local trotters willing to wager as much as their pride demanded, even though the general population of the race sites bet smaller sums and often backed Zeus, cutting down on what Contrition and Justin netted.

Contrition's hoard of cash grew, and her eyes took on a faraway expression as she dreamed of the triumph she would experience when she exacted her vengeance against Gerald Haywood.

Her success as a racing driver went to her head, as well. As the winning driver, and a mere lad at that, she was lionized in the common rooms of the inns after the races. She was slapped on the back, sometimes hard enough to almost knock her off her feet. She was shaken hands with until her arm all but fell off. Spirituous drink was urged on her, some of which she had to accept in order not to offend the offerers. Every such celebration added to the danger of her sex being discovered, and her true identity as well. Far too much interest was being fomented about her. Henry was becoming frantic.

"I want to talk to you," he told her, waylaying her at the conclusion of an evening's performance after another victory on the racecourse that afternoon.

"But I promised Mr. Odets that I'd have supper with him! You know the troupe always has a late supper after the performance. Can't it wait until morning?"

"No, it can't. Come outside, now!" Henry commanded.

Wondering what on earth ailed him, Contrition followed him outside into the balmy summer night. The odors from the stables hung heavy in the air, mingled with the aroma of roses and fields of blooming clover. Nothing in the world smelled as wonderful as a field of clover on a warm summer night, Contrition thought, breathing deeply, the odor of the stables bothering her not in the least. Good country smells all of them, and to be appreciated and savored as part of the better things in life.

"Dianna, this must stop! You're attracting a good deal too much attention, and if you don't go back to making yourself as inconspicuous as possible, somebody is sure to recognize you."

"Don't be a disaster monger!" Contrition scoffed at him. "Everybody thinks I'm a boy. It's so well established now that nobody's even guessed that I'm a member of the Olympians, much less a girl! I'm safer now than I've ever been."

"All the same, it's too great a chance to take. Look at this!" Henry said. He thrust a large piece of paper into her hand. Not being able to read what was written on it in the darkness, she moved to stand directly beneath one of the inn windows where light was spilling out.

The paper was a poster which Henry had ripped from its mooring in front of another inn. She felt a chill creep through her flesh as she made out that Amos Reeves had raised the reward for her apprehension from seven to ten dollars. Glory, her stepfather really wanted her back! As miserly as he was, it was certain that if he got her back, he would exact every penny's worth of the reward from the skin of her back.

"I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want to worry you. But a reward of that size is a danger to you. Even someone as stubborn

and as careless of her own safety as you ought to be able to understand that. And there's the matter of Justin."

"What about Mr. Odets? He's as happy as I am about our success. We make a good team. We're both getting what we want, and what could be better than that?"

"Justin's far too fond of you. He's falling in love with you."

Well, now! It was a little of a shock, because Contrition hadn't thought of such possibility, being too preoccupied with her own goal. But come to think of it, Justin did lavish a lot of attention on her, forever on her heels, falling all over himself to please her. And to be truthful, it did please her. Nobody had ever been in love with her before. It was a notion calculated to raise even further her already overinflated ego. To think that a gentleman as fine as Mr. Odets would fall in love with her when Evangeline was available!

"If he is, I can't see what concern it is to you." Goodness knew Henry himself thought that she wasn't worthy of being loved. Her pique made her voice sharp, and her eyes took on sparks that Henry could see even from the dim light from the inn window. "Or don't you think that I'm worthy of having young gentlemen fall in love with me?"

"It has nothing to do with your being worthy of having men fall in love with you! It's just that both you and Justin are bound to be hurt. If you don't care to think about yourself, think about Justin. He's vulnerable, Contrition. Falling in love with you and not being able to have you would hurt him more than I care to think about."

Contrition's temper flared. Mr. Henry Davenport was a fine one to talk! Hadn't he all but made her fall in love with him and then scorned her, acting as if she was beneath his notice except to snipe at and deride?

"Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing if he fell in love with me! Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing if I fell in love with him, too! He's certainly the nicest, sweetest, kindest man I've ever known or could ever hope to know! We'd be happy together—what could be so bad about that?"

It was true, too. Every word of it was true. She was almighty fond of Mr. Justin Odets, and she grew fonder of him with every day that passed. He was certainly a deal more worthy of being fallen in

love with than Mr. Henry Davenport, who was disagreeable and supercilious and altogether infuriating.

Using her sweetest voice, because she knew instinctively that it would be more effective than showing the anger she felt, Contrition said, "Thank you for alerting me to the danger of Mr. Odets falling in love with me. But now that I come to think of it, I think it's a wonderful idea! As a matter of fact, it's made me realize just how much I already think of him. I do believe that I'm already in love with him, I've just been too busy to realize it! Now if you'll excuse me, I'll go and join him. He'll be waiting for me, wondering where I am. It's such a lovely evening, no doubt he and I will take a stroll afterwards. The moon tonight is downright romantical, don't you think?"

"You little idiot, have a care for what you're letting yourself and Justin in for!" Henry shouted at her.

"And you mind your own blasted business!" Contrition shouted back, all her good intentions about keeping her temper, the better to put Henry in his place, flying to the winds.

"You're not in love with Justin! You're just an empty-headed, thrill-seeking young girl, in love with the idea of being in love! Any man would do, as long as he had two legs and wasn't cross-eyed!"

"That's all you know about it! If Mr. Odets were cross-eyed I'd still be in love with him!"

"Blast you!" Henry felt like grasping her and shaking her until her teeth rattled. She needed a spanking, that's what she needed. He'd always considered himself a man who could never dream of laying violent hands on a female, but Contrition would drive a saint to violence.

"If you're feeling so all-fired romantic, let's try this!" he said. An instant later, he'd swept her into his arms and his mouth came down over hers.

For an instant, but only for an instant, Contrition was paralyzed by surprise. But only for an instant. The moon was indeed romantic, the odors hanging in the summer air were heady, she was seventeen going on eighteen, and she'd been driven half out of her mind by Mr. Henry Davenport ever since she'd kissed him and made him kiss her back in her desperation to make him realize that she was a

woman grown and not a child. Against her will, her arms went around his neck and her mouth parted under his.

The kiss went on and on until Contrition thought that she was going to perish from lack of breath and from the fire inside her, but she didn't care. It was the nicest way to die she could think of, insofar as she was capable of thinking.

Henry held the kiss for as long as he was able to endure it, which was a good deal longer than he'd had any notion of when he'd been rash enough to kiss her in the first place. He was tied in knots, his insides were shaking like one of his mother's Christmas jellies, and he pushed her away, the roughness of both his arms and his voice emphasized by his roiling emotions, which had gotten entirely out of hand.

"There! If you're in love with Justin, how could you kiss me the way you just did? Just as I told you, any man would do!"

While Contrition just stood there, too numb to move, he turned and strode off into the darkness. She took a deep breath, shaking in every limb, and then she took another, and she screamed after him, "Damn you, Henry Davenport! Blast your ornery hide! You didn't prove a goldurned thing! I'm a play-actress, remember?"

And that, she thought with bitter chagrin, was just about the worst lie she'd ever told, because she hadn't been playacting at all. Damn him and blast him! Just for that, just for making an absolute fool of her, she'd show him! She'd fall in love with Justin Odets, and they'd live happily ever after as soon as she'd finished her business in Albany, and that would show Mr. Henry Davenport once and for all!

10

CONTRITION sat next to Jonathan Yeats in church, her head under the bonnet she'd bought with her winnings bent modestly in prayer, the very picture of pious devotion. Sad to tell, her thoughts were more on her bonnet than on her prayers. It was a dicty bonnet, Lotta had helped her choose it, and she'd paid more for it than she'd imagined that anyone could pay for a whole outfit from head to toe. The bonnet was blue, a suitable color for a young lady, but the blue was the exact color of her eyes and of the new dress Lotta had stitched up for her in the latest fashion. The bonnet was beflowered and beribboned, its brim curving around her face in a perfect circle. The dress emphasized roundness, roundness was all the thing. Contrition was, for the first time in her life, a young lady of fashion, and beside her, Jonathan Yeats was a distinguished gentleman of fashion, escorting his charges to church as befitted a gentleman of a Sunday.

It was necessary for Contrition to attend church, to familiarize herself with the order of the service, to learn the prayers and the hymns, so that when she went to Albany she would be able to insinuate herself into the society there through her church attendance, the quickest way to get a foot in the door.

On the other side of Contrition, Justin sat with his head also bowed during the prayer that seemed to go on a good deal longer than was reasonable. Wouldn't it suffice for the minister to thank the Almighty for favors received and to ask for favors desired and let it go at that? Contrition swallowed a giggle, thinking of all the hundreds, the thousands, of people in churches throughout the country at this very moment who were praying identical prayers, all

of them droning on and on and on until the angels must be fidgeting with boredom and God himself losing his patience. God wasn't a dimwit; he didn't have to have the same thing repeated over and over before he understood. But this minister seemed to think that if he didn't repeat the same thing over and over, God wouldn't get it through his head what was wanted of him.

I'm going to ask her, Justin thought. I'm going to ask her to marry me. His prayer was personal and private, and had nothing to do with begging forgiveness for sins he hadn't committed or that he might be tempted to commit in the future. The minister would have been outraged if he'd known what Justin was praying for: to marry an actress! But it was the only thing Justin could think of to pray for at the moment. He couldn't very well pray to win all the races that would fall his way in the future; that wouldn't be a proper thing to pray for at all. And besides, at this moment in his life, he didn't much care if he won any more races or not. He'd won enough of them to vindicate himself in his father's eyes, and to satisfy his own yearnings to excel at something, even if it was only in owning the fastest trotter in several counties.

Reflecting further, Justin added a touching appeal that his father wouldn't disinherit him for marrying an actress. Not because Justin would mind all that much being disinherited for himself, being young and able-bodied, of sufficient education so that he would be sure to find some way to support himself, but because he yearned to shower Contrition with all the luxuries she'd never had. Her pleasure in her new gown and bonnet had touched him so deeply that he'd had to blink tears out of his eyes. She should have a dozen new gowns, a dozen new bonnets, she should have lacy parasols and dainty slippers and French mitts for her hands, a carriage and pair that would be the envy of every lady in Albany. She should have the best of everything in the world.

The prayer was over at last, and Justin hoped that he'd had time to ask for everything he wanted and that he hadn't forgotten anything. The congregation rose and their voices raised in the hymn, *Come, Thou Almighty King*. Jonathan had a surprisingly true tenor voice, Justin's deeper voice was not unpleasant although not always on key, and Contrition's voice was a contralto, true enough but nothing remarkable.

On the far side of Justin, Lotta's voice rose like an angel's, the tones so sweet and pure that her singing sent shivers up and down Contrition's spine, and several among the congregation so forgot themselves as to turn to see what nightingale had alighted among them.

Contrition knew all the words, Jonathan had seen to that. "Come, Thou Almighty King, Help us thy name to sing, Help us to praise: Father all glorious, O'er all victorious, Come and reign over us, Ancient of Days."

Contrition sang with good heart. She liked that part about o'er all victorious, because that was just what she was setting out to do. She was going to be victorious over Gerald Haywood, and she was going to be victorious over Henry Davenport, too, proving to him that she could fall in love with Mr. Justin Odets whether Mr. Henry Davenport liked it or not.

All four verses were sung, there was no fudging by skipping the third verse. There was plenty of time. Services lasted a full two hours. Contrition liked the singing; it was a deal less boring than the preaching and the praying. She didn't mind the responsive reading, either. "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another."

That fit right in with what she'd been thinking about doing. She should love Justin and he should love her. But "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice," wasn't so good. How in tunket was she supposed to do that? She did feel bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour against Gerald Haywood, and she was certainly going to speak evil against him, the first chance she got. Why couldn't they have read something about smiting one's enemies instead and God helping to strike them down? The Bible was certainly confusing. First it said one thing and then it said another, until you didn't know where to stand, but in the end she guessed you just had to decide for yourself whether to be forgiving or wrathful, and she certainly was going to be wrathful about Gerald Haywood and he was going to feel all the vengeance she could bring down upon him, whether the Lord helped her or not.

No one else from the troupe attended church services, not being at all sure that their presence would be welcome, theatrical people

being held in ill repute as they were. Lotta had only come because Contrition had begged her to, to lend her moral support. Lotta wasn't at all sure that the roof of the church wouldn't fall in just because she had set foot under it. On the other hand, Lotta yearned to go to church, she yearned toward salvation, only how could she be saved when she was an actress?

During the sermon, Contrition closed her ears and thought about something else. She would have listened if the minister had talked about anything that interested her, only he didn't. She always gave the minister of any church she and Jonathan attended a fair trial before she closed her ears. As long as the minister wasn't talking about anything that concerned her, she might as well think about things that did, and get in a few silent prayers that her efforts would come to fruition.

After the services were over, when Contrition and Jonathan and Justin and Lotta had filed past the minister and shaken his hand, a good many of the legitimate members of the congregation spoke to them, asking if they had enjoyed the sermon and whether they were newcomers to town who would be attending regularly. It always pleased Contrition when that happened, vindicating her contention that they were fine performers, to fool people like this into thinking that they were substantial people of worth and quality.

"No, we are just passing through. You have a fine town here, a fine town indeed, and we only wish that we could tarry to enjoy another Sunday service in your estimable church," Jonathan always told them, making them beam with approval at the gentleman who so approved of them and their church and their town. No one, of course, could mistake Justin for anything but a gentleman, and Contrition and Lotta both looked and played the parts of modest, well-reared young ladies to perfection. Lotta was certainly modest even if she wasn't well-reared, and Contrition tried to be modest, at least while she was in church, but it was harder for her because it didn't come naturally.

Wherever the troupe had camped outside of town, leaving the Conniewagons and horses in his care, Henry sulked and brooded, thinking of Contrition in that damnably attractive blue dress and blue bonnet with Justin beside her. It was as though they were already

establishing a pattern of what their life together would be once they were married, attending services together every Sunday as all decent people did, happy in each other's company and needing no one else.

With every passing day, Henry became more convinced that Contrition was going to charge full speed ahead, her eyes blind to the obstacles in front of her, and marry Justin no matter if the obstacles would crush her when she hit them. There was no use in trying to talk to her. She wouldn't listen. Ever since the last time he'd tried to talk to her and ended up kissing her till he'd almost exploded with his own need for her, she'd held him at arm's length, her eyes flashing scorn at him when she bothered to look at him at all.

There was even less use in trying to talk to Justin. Love was not only blind, it was also deaf. Justin meant to have Contrition no matter the consequences, and God help them both if he succeeded in marrying her.

On this particular Sunday, while the troupe was enjoying one of the bountiful dinners that their new prosperity allowed them, Contrition made the innocent remark that it seemed good not to have to pilfer from henhouses an hour before dawn in order to be sure of having something to eat. "Even if the extra exercise covering all that ground did give me a better appetite," she finished, tucking into her dinner with an appetite that seemed to need no improving.

Justin was horrified. "But that was dangerous! What if you'd been set upon by a dog, or caught? You mustn't ever do such a thing again!"

"I wasn't about to get caught." Contriton laughed at him. "Getting caught would have meant going to jail, and they'd have sent me back to my stepfather. That was a good reason to make darnation sure that I wasn't caught."

"Nevertheless, you're not to do it any more! I can't imagine how the troupe ever allowed you to do it in the first place!"

"Then I expect that you've never been hungry," Contrition said, her voice tart. "Being hungry can make you change your mind about a lot of things."

"Well, you'll never be hungry again, as long as I'm with you! You or any of the others!" Justin declared, shaken to the core at the

dangers to which Contrition had been exposed in order to be able to eat.

Henry gritted his teeth. In spite of the fact that Justin used to be among Henry's most intimate friends, and that he had always had a deep personal liking for him, Henry's regard for Justin was growing thin. Because of Justin and that confounded horse he'd had the luck to win in a game of whist, Contrition had been transformed from a waif into a young lady, a very attractive young lady. The money she won had provided her with the wherewithal to buy that material for the blue dress, to buy the bonnet that was so becoming that even Evangeline was jealous. And soon it would enable her to go to Albany where she would be destroyed, unless Justin persuaded her to marry him instead. Henry didn't know which alternative was the worse.

It was a pity that Zeus didn't go lame. Henry wished the trotter no harm. Just a little lameness that would put him out of competition for the rest of the summer and persuade Justin to go back home where he belonged, before this pretty kettle of fish turned into a seething cauldron.

If Justin were out of the picture even for a few months, that rascal Leon Murdoch would be located and hauled home and Henry's troubles would be over, leaving him with the time and the opportunity to do something about Contrition. As it was now, Contrition and Justin, between the two of them, were driving him out of his mind.

As their small caravan approached Pompey the day after Contrition's initial wearing of her new finery to church, the road became increasingly clogged with other vehicles, from buggies to farm carts and wagons to carriages and fine rigs. There were even a considerable number of people legging it.

Anton groaned. There'd be no profitable performance at Pompey because such throngs of people converging on one place could only mean one thing. There was going to be a camp meeting, one whale of a camp meeting, and everybody who could get there would be there, with no interest at all left over to watch even the most uplifting plays and performances the troupe could offer. Even worse, the preachers would exhort the people to shun playacting, which

they claimed was sinful and calculated to set their feet on the road to hades.

But if Anton's heart sank, and the rest of the troupe were depressed, Justin's spirits were high.

"Everybody from every walk of life attends camp meetings," Justin enthused. "Maybe we won't get to play, but I'll sure as sugar be able to drum up one whale of a trotting race! And with all these people, we'll make a fortune!"

Since the Olympians had been fortunate enough so far this season not to have run into any other camp meetings, this was Contrition's first experience of such a phenomenon, and her excitement exceeded Justin's. Where had all these people come from? Lordy, there must be more people in the world than she'd ever dreamed of, for so many to be right here in a little country town!

The streets were thronged; everybody jostling for elbowroom. At the site of the camp meeting itself, a grove a short distance out of town, there were vehicles everywhere, most of the worshippers having come prepared to spend two or three days or even a week. Religion, Jonathan informed her, was one of the foremost industries of the nation, because while people could do without goods and services, they all needed religion and had a deep-seated craving for large doses of it to supplement their more moderate doses throughout the year.

"It's the high point of their lives," Jonathan explained. "They look forward to it all year long. But I am sorry to say that not only do those seeking salvation converge on the sites of the camp meetings but also every type of scoundrel and wastrel and ne'er-do-well who can manage to attend. No decent woman would dare to venture into the campgrounds or even on the streets of town unescorted while it's going on. You ladies of the troupe must bear that in mind and not take it into your heads to explore unless one or more of us men are with you."

"Fiddlesticks!" Contrition said, tossing her head. "Lotta and Vangie and Dolly had better stick close to you gentlemen, but there's no reason I can't go out and see what's going on. Dressed like a boy, who'd know the difference or pay any attention to me at all?"

"Miss Laverne, you mustn't! You simply must not!" Justin protested, his face bright red with alarm.

"Indeed she must not," Dolly backed him up. "In fact, I expressly forbid it! I mean that, Dianna."

Henry settled it. "If you pull such a stupid trick, I'll whale the living daylights out of you, right through those boy's britches you'll be wearing. And maybe I'll even take them down to make sure you feel it the way you should feel it!"

"Henry, how dare you speak to Miss Laverne in such a manner! It's the height of indelicacy, to say nothing of indecency!" Justin spluttered, his face turning redder than ever.

"Indelicate or indecent, I'll do it." Henry said, with such quiet conviction that Contrition had no choice but to believe him. He'd do it, and even if she never forgave him, she'd still be the one who was humiliated. Her general fury at Henry mounted, and she swore she'd find a way to get back at him.

She didn't have to wait very long to plunge into the excitement because all of the troupe except Henry were eager to make the most of this unexpected holiday. They set off in a group as soon as they'd found a camping place, much farther outside of town than usual because all of the closer spots were already taken.

There was no hope of getting accommodations at the inn, with the swarms of people who were already bursting Pompey at the seams. Not that the troupe minded, as used as they were to camping out when the gate was poor. They were in high spirits as they set off on foot for the camp meeting.

Dolly insisted that Contrition keep close to her. "You'll see more riffraff here than you'll ever see anywhere else in the world, except at another camp meeting," Dolly told her. "And with people here from far and wide, who knows but that someone might recognize you, even disguised as a boy?"

Riffraff there was, not only crowding the streets of the town, but concentrated in unbelievable numbers on the perimeter of the meeting grounds, where booths of every sort had been set up, where spirituous drink, from switchel and rumbullion and Metheglyn to kill-divvie to gumption to belly-whip vengeance was offered for sale. Plain whiskey sold for twenty cents a gallon.

There were abortionists offering Seven Sisters for sale, side by side with birthdames who drummed up business for delivering babies, accosting women who were obviously near their time and contracting to attend them when the need came. Quacksalvers were everywhere, offering cures for every ailment under the sun. There were gingerbread booths and taffy booths and fortunetelling booths, where for a six-penny piece one could get a glimpse into the future. Every kind of dincum was going on all around them. Contrition couldn't conceive of how people could be so gullible as astonishing numbers of them handed over good money for things that were worthless, to say the least, and might be harmful, to say the worst. Only the birthdames were legitimate, experienced midwives whose services were worth what they asked.

Games of chance were in full progress, and two wrestlers were attempting to commit mayhem on each other while canalers and towpath hoodlums and town ne'er-do-wells and gentlemen alike urged them on. It was as if all the world had congregated in this spot, until there was scarcely elbowroom, let alone standing room. With her small size, if it hadn't been for Dolly's bulk on one side of her and Justin's on the other, Contrition would have been in danger of being crushed.

Not so Jody, whose even smaller size enabled him to dart hither and yon, his face shining with excitement, darting and wriggling between men's legs and through cracks that a gnat would have had trouble negotiating. Jody, his eyes alight, was searching for one particular face, that of his father. Some day, somewhere, Jody was determined that he was going to find Dermont P. Dimwiddle and take leave of his mother and the Olympians forever.

"Jody La Lune, don't you dast go gambling!" Evangeline shrilled.
"It isn't decent."

Jody's glance back over his shoulder withered her. Acting wasn't decent. A little gambling was downright virtuous, compared to acting! Actors were gypsies and vagabonds, and the actresses, worser things that unfortunately, in spite of his tender years, Jody understood. But his mother was stupid to think that he'd gamble. Dermont P. Dimwiddle did not approve of gambling, and so Jody didn't either.

Evangeline gave up and let him go his own way. No harm would come to him. He was as smart as a whip and agile enough to sidestep any trouble that might loom up in his path. He'd show up at the campsite in his own good time, if he didn't tire of his search and find the Olympians sooner.

"And this is only the beginning of the afternoon!" Contrition gasped. "What must it be like at night?"

"No place for a lady, that I can tell you!" Jonathan instructed her. "Although if you'd like to attend the preaching, I'll be more than happy to escort you through this rascallion throng to the safety of the meeting proper."

Lotta was shocked white-faced and almost speechless by the things that were going on around them. "Right next to the meeting place!" she gasped. "I can't understand why God doesn't send down a bolt of lightning to strike them all dead!"

Dolly's voice was dry and laced with humor. "I expect that the Lord is so taken with fair play that he wants to give the devil a fair chance. It'll make it more interesting when the final showdown comes."

Lotta's face turned as white as paper. 'Mrs. Burnside! You'll have to attend the preaching, and beg forgiveness for saying such a thing!'

"I only say it the way I see it," Dolly said cheerfully. "But Mr. Yeats would do well to escort us to the preaching this evening, he'd do well indeed. I would dearly like to hear it, and it will do none of us any harm. Nobody's any better than he should be, even if he thinks otherwise." Her glance at Gavin Hurley left no doubt as to her meaning, and it wasn't altogether necessary for her to add, "At the very least, some of us are afflicted with the sin of conceit."

Not satisfied with that, she turned her attention to Jonathan. "Perhaps our Mr. Yeats will be prevailed upon to take The Minister's Oath, as well. He could do that even if he won't promise to give up the demon rum altogether."

"My dear lady, I do not drink rum. I drink brandy, a gentleman's beverage, and I have even forgone that these many weeks past."

Contrition's curiosity was piqued. "What's The Minister's Oath?" she wanted to know.

"Why, it's promising not to get drunk more than four times a year, on Christmas, Muster Day, Independence Day, and Sheepshearing," Dolly told her, surprised that Contrition didn't know. She'd thought everybody knew that.

Justin, who had attended many a camp meeting, camp meetings offering so much of the amusement and excitement dear to young gentlemen's hearts, was growing restless. As much as he hated to leave Contrition to the protection of Mr. Burnside and Mr. Yeats and Mr. Hurley, he had other, urgent business to attend to. He was itching to drive Zeus down the main street, with Zeus stepping high and trotting as only Zeus could trot, and see what kind of a race he could drum up. A good trotting race would draw a crowd away from even this perimeter of the camp meeting, and there was seldom a chance to draw a crowd as large as could be drawn here in Pompey today.

"You go on," Contrition told him. "Show Zeus off good! We'll make our fortunes!"

"Yes, go on," Dolly said. "We can protect Dianna and Lotta from all the randydandying going on here." Contrition noted with amusement that Dolly didn't mention protecting Evangeline. Evangeline noticed it as well and her face flushed.

"Lay a wager for me, Mr. Odets," she said, smiling her sweetest, most seductive smile.

"No, I'll do that," Gavin said. "He mustn't go wagering for all of us or somebody might get wise. I'll wager for you and myself, and Anton can wager for Lotta and Dianna. Mr. Yeats can wager for himself and for Henry, if Henry cares to make a wager." This last was said with some puzzlement, as Henry had not yet laid even the smallest wager on Zeus. It certainly was odd, but then Henry himself was odd. If it hadn't been for the code of the thespians, Gavin would have been tempted to try and find out a good deal more about Henry than he already knew.

Justin's success at attracting attention as he drove down through Pompey was as great as his heart could desire. Even in these crowds, Zeus stood out, so that necks craned and eyes lighted up with astonished admiration. Being unable to find a spot to hitch up in front of the inn, Justin climbed down from the buggy and tossed the

ribbons, along with a two-bit piece, to a stripling who stood gaping. "Hold my horse for me, young gentleman, if you please, and if you take good care of him, there'll be a like amount for you when I emerge from the inn."

The stripling bobbed his head and reached for the buggy whip, holding it menacingly in one hand while he held the ribbons with the other. "There's nobody gonna get near him, you have my word on it!" His ferocious glares at the crowd gathering around attested that anyone who ventured to lay a hand on this horse would be sorry for it.

At the bar in the common room, Justin found himself surrounded by admirers of horseflesh. "That's a likely looking trotter you have, young sir."

"He'll do," Justin said.

"How fast do you allow he is?"

"Faster than Yankee. He's been timed at considerably less than three minutes for the mile." Yankee, as every trotting enthusiast knew, was the first trotter to cover a mile in less than three minutes, a feat that had been accomplished at Harlem, New York, back in '06, thus setting the standard for trotters.

His audience was impressed. "You seem mighty sure of that, sir."

"I've never had occasion to change my mind."

The conversation was promising enough, but these weren't the men Justin was interested in. Things looked up when a man who was obviously a real gentleman approached him, the lesser citizens backing off to give him room, their respect showing on their collective faces.

The newcomer proffered his hand. "That your horse outside?" he asked, as though there were only one horse outside, as indeed there was only one as far as trotting-horse men were concerned.

"It is, sir. Justin Odets, at your service."

"Clarence MacIntyre, at yours. I have a reasonably good trotter myself. Fly-By-Night. Perhaps you've heard of him."

Justin gulped. Even as far away as Albany, he had heard of Fly-By-Night. It was just possible that Mr. MacIntyre's presence in Pompey was a bite larger than he could chew. Zeus was good, but as far as Justin had ever heard, Fly-By-Night was better.

"I'd like to oblige you, sir, but a two-horse race scarcely seems worthwhile. You were thinking of putting it to the test?"

"I quite agree with you. There are a few other promising-looking trotters here in Pompey today. If I can interest another one or two gentlemen, I take it that you would find it worth your while?"

In for a penny, in for a pound. With all eyes on him, avid with interest, Justin couldn't back down. "You can be assured of it. You understand, though, that I don't drive, myself. I have a lad who does my driving for me."

Mr. MacIntyre's ears pricked up. He'd heard of that! Word of a magnificent trotter who won every race he was in, driven by a lad rather than by his owner, had a way of getting around. Mr. MacIntyre's interest flared to new heights. A contest worthy of his own Fly-By-Night at last! As there was no possibility that Fly-By-Night would lose, even though the race might be close enough to be interesting, Mr. MacIntyre intended to wager a great deal on his own trotter.

"I'll make some inquiries and see what I can do," Mr. MacIntyre said. A well-built man in his early forties, his clothing expensively tailored, he exuded confidence. Justin's misgivings mounted. He'd better hedge his bets and tell the Olympians to do the same. He didn't doubt that Zeus would come in second, and they'd make a tidy profit after all, even with the bad luck of having Mr. MacIntyre and Fly-By-Night here in Pompey.

Contrition was furious when Justin found the Olympians back at the campsite late that afternoon, with Contrition contriving a hearty supper for them from supplies Anton and Dolly had bought, and all of them planning on attending the preaching that evening.

"Not bet on Zeus to win? Are you out of your mind, Mr. Odets? I'm going to wager every penny I have on Zeus to win!"

As a matter of fact, she'd only planned to bet half of what she'd saved, but Justin's lack of confidence in both Zeus and herself filled her with such rage that she felt that she had to bet it all, just to show what she thought.

"And I'll wager all I have!" Lotta exclaimed. "Dianna not win, Mr. Odets? I'm surprised at you! Of course she'll win, how could

she help but win, with Zeus trotting his heart out for her the way he always does?"

Justin felt like crying. "Maybe you haven't heard of Fly-By-Night but I have! He's famous! I'd mislike to see you lose your money."

"We aren't going to lose it," Contrition said flatly. "I've a mind to tell Zeus to bite you again, Mr. Odets!"

To Justin's consternation, all of the troupe sided with Contrition. They'd seen her drive Zeus, and they had every confidence in her. To their minds, nobody could drive as well as Contrition, and no other horse could trot as fast as Zeus. It was a matter of pride as well as of money. Contrition and Zeus were their own, and they'd back the pair of them to the limit.

Henry was sardonic. "You might as well leave off arguing, Justin. If they lose, it'll be on their own heads. You warned them, so you can't be held responsible." Henry's feelings were mixed. He'd hate to see the others lose. The loss would be a hard blow to them. On the other hand, if Contrition gambled everything she had on the race out of her overweening arrogance, and lost, then her fund for going to Albany would be gone. Being taken down a peg, as well as being flat broke, might teach her some of the realities of life, such as you can't fight the wealthy and powerful with any hope of winning.

Henry's values had undergone a considerable change since he had become a fugitive and cast in his lot with the Olympians. He himself had been one of the wealthy and powerful, scarcely giving thought to those less fortunate who moved on lower planes of society. He'd never been intentionally arrogant or ruthless, he'd simply seldom had occasion to think about it. But now he knew that those people whom his own class thought of as being of lesser worth knew nothing of the loyalty and courage and compassion of which the lower classes were capable. As much as he disliked being a fugitive, he felt himself richer for having been forced to know them and live among them. If it didn't make a better human being of him, then he wasn't worthy of the friendship they'd given him without question.

Justin returned to the inn where he had arranged to meet Mr. MacIntyre that evening and share supper with him while he learned what success Mr. MacIntyre had had in arranging a race that would be worthy of both Zeus and Fly-By-Night.

Mr. MacIntyre had met with success. Two other trotters had also been entered and the race was to be held the next morning at nine o'clock. The course was one mile and no extra heats would be run—this was to be a contest between gentlemen, not a race meet. Excitement was already high, wagers were already being placed. Everyone who had a coin in his pocket was laying it on the line.

This race was going to be for blood. It was no place for a girl, to say nothing of a girl as young and small and tender as Miss Dianna Laverne. If Zeus lost, those unfortunate enough to have bet on him, the riffraff, might take it into their heads to take their losses out of her hide. As the riffraff far outnumbered the gentlemen who would be present, it was not a promising outlook, and Justin concluded that he had better go to the preaching and do a deal of more fervent praying than he'd ever done before.

Contribution was, to put it mildly, flabbergasted at the preaching. The benches were jammed with people, so tightly packed that there was hardly room to take a deep breath. The Olympians had had to fight their way through the perimeter of the campground where the carniviallike carousings were going on, the booths doing a landslide business, and drunken and near-drunk men determined to extract the last ounce of pleasure from this opportunity to celebrate and brawl to their heart's content.

There wasn't just one preacher on the platform, there were three. There had to be three for the non-stop shouting and exhorting that issued from their throats. There were sinners to be saved, and since it was well known that words of righteousness fell on deaf ears, it behooved the preachers to shout loudly enough so that even the most hardened could not fail to hear their message.

"Repent, repent! Come forward and fall on your knees and beg the all-merciful Almighty to forgive you your sins and accept you into the fold before He has to cast you into the everlasting flames, where your sizzling flesh will shrivel and turn black and raise in blisters through all eternity!"

"Seems like they're trying to scare folks into being good instead of persuading them that being good is the best way to be," Contribution murmured to Lotta.

Lotta looked uncertain. "Well, they're preachers, they must know what they're about. There's a lot of sin in the world."

"But the sinners are all out there where the booths are, guzzling and gambling and carousing; they aren't hearing the preachers at all. It's the people who're already good who're here listening to the preaching. Seems like something isn't quite right about this whole thing!"

"I'm a sinner," Lotta said, her eyes and voice filled with woe. "I'm an actress, and that makes me a sinner. I tried being a mill mechanic, but I got sick—it was too hard for me. And I tried being a househussy, but the ladies said I was too pretty to be trusted. When Dolly found me walking the streets crying because I had no money and no place to turn, I was thinking about killing myself before I'd have to be a . . . a . . ." Lotta couldn't bring herself to say the word. "I would have killed myself, before I'd do that. But now I'm an actress, and everyone thinks I'm . . . that . . . anyway, and I'm a sinner."

Her face white, Lotta started to get up and go forward to throw herself on the mercy of the ever-merciful Almighty and swear never to set foot on a stage again. On the other side, Dolly grasped her skirt and pulled her back into her seat. The Olympians couldn't do without Lotta, and besides, if Lotta went and got herself saved, she'd be as badly off as she'd been when Dolly had found her. She'd end up either starving to death or killing herself so she wouldn't have to be one of . . . those.

"Lotta, don't be a goose! You aren't a sinner! Oh, lands, what ails that woman?" Contrition broke off to gasp. The woman, three rows in front of them, had toppled off the board and was writhing on the ground. Good glory, why didn't somebody help her?

Somebody was helping her. A woman on one side and a man on the other grasped her under the armpits and supported her to the platform where she stretched out her arms and wailed that she was a sinner and had to be saved. She didn't look like a sinner to Contrition. She looked middle-aged and conservative, a decent housewife, but everyone was shouting "Hallelujah!" and laughing and crying with joy, and the woman was laughing and crying with joy too, so she must be all right, after all.

But for herself, Contrition wasn't going to go rolling around in the dirt making a spectacle of herself, and she wasn't going to let Lotta do it, either. Lotta didn't need saving because Lotta was good. And for herself, it wouldn't do any good to be saved because she was planning on bringing her father to ruin.

Getting saved would have to wait.

Having come to that conclusion, she settled down to enjoy the preaching.

11

CONTRITION was the first one awake in the morning, opening her eyes as the first rays of the sun appeared over the horizon. Her years on her stepfather's farm had made dawn-rising a habit that was hard to break.

The moment consciousness returned, she was flooded with excitement. Today was the day she was going to make her fortune. Anton had already put all her money on Zeus to win, and she didn't have a doubt in her mind that in just a few hours she'd be a wealthy young woman. Maybe Fly-By-Night was a champion, but Zeus wouldn't let her down. Anton had told her that the betting was overwhelmingly in favor of Fly-By-Night to win, and by the time the race actually took place, there was no telling what the odds would be, but they would be heavy enough to be mind-boggling.

Cautiously, so as not to wake Vangie and Lotta, she reached for her outfit of boy's clothing and wriggled into it. She let herself down out of the Conniewagon and crept through the still-sleeping camp to where Zeus was hobbled along with the wagon horses. Zeus whickered when he saw her and put his head on her shoulder.

"Good boy, good Zeus! You're going to show that Fly-By-Night your heels, aren't you? You've just got to win if you don't I'll be ruint! And so will everybody else in the troupe. You've got to trot faster than you ever trotted before. You'll do it, I know you will. You wouldn't let your own Contrition down, would you?"

Zeus nodded, agreeing with her. She could almost swear that he understood English. Of course she knew that he didn't, but he'd know, when he felt her hands on the ribbons, that this race was special, that he had to outdo himself. It doesn't take spoken language to communicate.

She busied herself examining him in the dim morning light. She looked into his eyes, which were clear and bright. She ran her hands along his flanks and down his legs, she lifted his feet one by one and examined his hooves. Everything was fine, there wasn't a thing wrong with him, and he was in top fettle and raring to go. She'd just hitch him up and give him a short workout to loosen him up, not that he needed it, before the others woke up clamoring for their breakfast.

Behind a clump of bushes, three burly lads, nearing adulthood but not quite there, looked at each other. They were roughly dressed, and their faces were avid with greed and determination.

"I toltyou that that there's the horse, I toltyou I done followed that Mr. Odets here yestidy! That there's Zeus and that there's the young whippersnapper what drives 'im. Well, are you game? Everything we got pickin' pockets last night on Fly-By-Night! Without that there whippersnapper, this here Zeus ain't gonna win. We'll be rich!"

"We're game. What're we waitin' on? Let's grab him now afore any of them others wakes up."

"Quiet, now! No noise!"

As quiet as they were, Zeus heard them although Contrition didn't, being too intent on her examination of her darling to be listening to as much as the birds twittering in the trees. Zeus's suddenly alert head and pricking ears came too late. A hand was clasped over her mouth, arms were clamped around her body, holding her own arms helpless at her sides, and she was dragged; struggle as she might, away into the bushes.

"He's a lively one!" the leader of the trio grunted as Contrition's legs flailed, kicking out at her captors with all her might. "Hurry up,

git that jackaroo out whilst we kin still holt onto him! You shoulda use it afore we grabbed him, you idjut!"

The jackaroo, a narrow, cloth bag filled with sand, a blackjack, was produced. A hand rose and fell, and Contrition's knees crumpled while a lump the size of a goose egg rose on the back of her head.

She was lifted and carried, so roughly that she would have been even more outraged than she already was if she'd been conscious to feel it. The pace was fast because the boys were strong and they had long legs that were used to covering country miles as they made their way through a world that was hostile to them, scamps that they were, fighting back the only way they knew how by any means that came to their hands. They worked as little as possible, pilfered where they could, picked pockets when it was safe, as it had been at the meeting grounds last night where the saved were too fired up with salvation to pay heed to their pockets and the sinners were too fired up with strong drink to realize that their pockets were being picked.

Trussed up like a pig for the butchering, Contrition was deposited in the cellar of an abandoned and half-falling-down farmhouse near the outskirts of town. Her hands were bound behind her back, her ankles were lashed together, and a rag was stuck in her mouth to make an effective gag. The cellar door closed behind the departing colleguers, who hightailed it from there as fast as their legs would carry them, chortling with triumph and the anticipation of the bonanza that would fall into their hands once they'd placed their bets on Fly-By-Night and collected. By the time the young whippersnapper was found, Mr. High and Mighty Odets would have been forced either to drive Zeus himself or find somebody else to drive him. They had no doubt that the race would go on, because it was far too late to call it off. Mr. Highfalutin' Odets' life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel if he tried to back out at this stage of the game. The crowds thronging Pompey wanted a race, they expected a race, and they would have a race if they had to draw blood to ensure it.

Back at the campground, Henry had been brought awake by Zeus's shrill whinnying and stamping around. When he opened his eyes and blinked to clear them, Zeus was fighting against his

hobbles. Something had upset him, and Henry rolled out of his blanket and ran to the quivering animal, searching for signs of a bee sting or a snake slithering through the grass.

"Easy, boy, easy! What's gotten into you? I can't see anything wrong." Contrition would be fit to be tied if Zeus had been bitten; she set more store by this horse than she did by herself.

Zeus whickered, tossing his head. Henry was puzzled, but when he could find nothing wrong with the trotter or around the campsite, he soothed the horse and returned to the campfire, throwing sticks onto it to get it ready for preparing breakfast. Contrition was usually up and about by now—maybe that was what was wrong with Zeus. She'd overslept and the horse was complaining about it because she always visited him first thing before she even poked up the fire.

In the Conniewagon, Lotta opened her eyes. She hadn't slept very well until nearly dawn, being concerned with the state of her soul and trying to work up the courage to try being a mill mechanic again, or a househussy, so that she would be eligible to be saved.

It was a desperate decision to have to make. She wanted to be saved more than anything else in the world because life was short and eternity was eternal. It would be cruel lovely to be welcomed by the angels rather than plunged into that other place.

But on the other hand, she loved being an actress. Being one of the Olympians had brought her the only happiness she'd known since her mother and father, her little brother, and her two older sisters had all been carried off by the cholera, and she'd been thrust upon a cold and unwelcoming world to fend for herself.

Lotta loved Dolly as though Dolly were her true mother. She loved Evangeline, even though Evangeline didn't love her. She respected Mr. Burnside and Mr. Yeats and Mr. Hurley. Mr. Tibbs was like an uncle to her, Mr. Davenport was always kind to her. She loved being behind the footlights and making people happy, even though she didn't dare aspire to making them as happy as Vangie did. When she contemplated the ultimate fate of them all, she couldn't keep from crying. But she had her own soul to think of. If they refused to be saved, then they wouldn't be, but she could be if she gave up being an actress. Only how could she bear to leave them?

She'd ask Dianna. Dianna was smart, Dianna would advise her.

She reached out to touch Dianna, but her fingers encountered only Dianna's empty pillow.

Lotta came fully awake. Dianna was already up, of course, fussing around with Zeus as she did every morning, even if there wasn't going to be a race. And then she would set about making breakfast for them, and Lotta ought to be helping her right now. As quickly as she could without disturbing Vangie, which wasn't difficult because Vangie slept like the dead, Lotta struggled into her clothing and climbed down from the Conniewagon.

There was Zeus with the other horses, hobbled off to the side of the camp, but Dianna wasn't with him. Lotta frowned. Where could she be?

She began looking around, but the camp was so small that it took her only half a minute to determine that Dianna wasn't there. Mr. Davenport was feeding the fire; his blanket, a short distance away, was still rumpled from his night's sleep.

"Mr. Davenport, have you seen Dianna? I can't find her anywhere!"

Henry was instantly alert, his face filled with consternation. "She has to be here, there isn't any other place she could be."

"But she isn't! Oh, Mr. Davenport, what can have happened to her?"

Within minutes the camp was fully awake, with startled exclamations of astonishment and apprehension and disbelief. Where was Dianna? What could have become of her? Her boy's clothing was missing from the Conniewagon, so she'd clearly got up and dressed that morning.

"She's been taken! A puke's got her!" Dolly cried, her eyes wide with grief and alarm. "Some bounty hunter recognized her yesterday and sneaked into camp and took her while we were all asleep and couldn't help her!"

"Nonsense, my dear. A puke wouldn't have waited to sneak her away behind our backs, he'd have taken her the minute he saw her. The law would be on his side and there wouldn't be a thing we could do about it."

"The preaching grounds!" Lotta said. "She might have gone back there to wait for the first preacher to show up, and ask for salvation!"

Henry didn't believe that for a moment. Contrition Reeves wasn't the sort of girl who'd go seeking for salvation at the crack of dawn, especially on a day she was going to race. Nevertheless, Gavin volunteered to hotfoot it to the preaching grounds just to make sure. Gavin, too, had wagered more than he could afford on the outcome to today's race, and if Dianna wasn't found, he'd be sorely out of pocket.

Anton went into town to inquire around and Lotta went with him. Henry beat the bushes and open stretches all around the campsite, his face grim, and Justin, his face as grim as Henry's and showing a great deal more fright, hitched Zeus up to the buggy and set out to cover as much of the local roads as Contrition could possibly have covered on foot.

All of the searchers returned in less than an hour, dejected and more alarmed than ever when no trace of Contrition had been found.

"There's only one possible conclusion," said Jonathan. "Somebody doesn't want Dianna driving in this morning's race, and whoever it was made sure that she wouldn't. Do you think that Mr. MacIntyre might have arranged for her disappearance, Mr. Odets?"

"I most certainly do not! Mr. MacIntyre is a gentleman. He'd never stoop to such a dastardly trick!"

"Well, if it wasn't Mr. MacIntyre, who has the most to lose if Zeus wins, it was someone else. But with all these hundreds of people drawn by the camp meeting, most of them strangers in Pompey and a good many of them the scum of the earth, I don't see that we have much chance of discovering who it was," Henry said. He was scowling and pacing. If anything happened to Contrition, he wouldn't know how to live with himself. He should have been more alert. He was the one who had slept out of doors; he should have come awake at the faintest sound. Instead, he'd slept like a log while Contrition was abducted right out from under his nose!

"Poor Dianna! Oh, poor Dianna!" Lotta sobbed. Her distress was so real that Henry felt pity for her. Contrition was like a sister to the love-starved, family-starved girl who had lost everybody of her own so many years ago. "What can they have done with her? Surely they won't hurt her? Oh, my gracious, what if they've killed her? I should have got saved last night, maybe this is a punishment!"

"Lotta, stop that idiotic babbling!" Dolly said, her voice sharp. "Getting saved or not getting saved has nothing to do with it. Dianna's a good girl and so are you. Neither of you needs saving. It's out-and-out rascallions have done this. And of course they won't hurt her—they'd not want murder on their heads and a hue and cry for miles around. All they want is to win at the race."

"Well said," Jonathan approved. "I agree with Mrs. Burnside. There's little chance that Dianna will come to harm. The motive is merely to keep her from driving Zeus today. As soon as the race is over, doubtless the scamps will release her from wherever they're holding her and disappear."

"But if she saw them!" Lotta pointed out. "If she saw them, would they dare to release her?"

It was a point that all of them wished she hadn't brought up.

"The race!" Evangeline cried, coming to herself in her usual practical manner. "Mr. Odets, you'll have to drive!"

"How can I drive, when I'm so worried about Miss Laverne? I wouldn't be able to get Zeus to more than stroll along the track! Besides, Zeus doesn't like me."

"Then Mr. Davenport will have to drive. I know he can handle a trotter, he gets along beautifully with all our horses except that he isn't as adept as Dianna at driving them through muddy bogs when it rains."

Justin looked at Henry and shook his head. It was unthinkable, Henry could not and must not drive. With so many people here from all points of the compass, the risk that he'd be recognized was too great to be taken.

Henry was fully aware of the risk. It was something that he would far rather not undertake. But almost every penny in the camp was down on Zeus, all of the others' as well as all of Contrition's savings. It was essential that Zeus have a fair chance to win. When Contrition was returned to them, she'd never forgive him if he hadn't taken her place rather than let Justin drive because it was a foregone conclusion that if Justin drove, Zeus wouldn't have a prayer of winning.

It wasn't as if there were anything he could do about getting Contrition back until after the race because it was certain that she'd

have been hidden where they'd have no chance of finding her. It was equally certain that she'd be released after the race was over. The consequences, if he brought Zeus over the finish line the winner and the abductors were angry enough to retaliate, were something that he didn't dare to dwell on. They wouldn't dare go as far as murder. At least he fervently hoped that they wouldn't.

It was a chance he had to take. As little as he liked it, there was no alternative. He couldn't plunge the Olympians into abject poverty, Contrition would never speak to him again, and there was no telling what else she might contrive to punish him for being chicken-hearted. Besides, his sense of fairness and decency rebelled at the thought of letting the miscreants profit by their misdeeds.

"Henry, no!" Justin said, reading in Henry's face the conclusion he'd come to. "I'll drive. Zeus doesn't really hate me any more. Besides, he's been in so many races with Miss Laverne at the ribbons that by now he's probably got it through his head that he's supposed to win."

"I'm driving," Henry said.

In the cellar of the abandoned farmhouse, Contrition came to her senses slowly, completely bewildered as to where she was and why she was here and why it was so dark when she'd been up and about with daylight well on the way.

Wherever she was, it was downright uncomfortable. The dirt floor was hard and cold underneath her, and her head hurt. She'd never known that her head could hurt that much. She tried to reach up to feel of it to see why it was hurting so much, and that was when she discovered that her hands were bound behind her back.

For an instant, rage blocked out her pain, and she tried to scream with fury, only to discover that she could only make a gurgling sound in her throat. She was gagged as well as bound; somebody had stuffed a rag in her mouth and tied it there!

She closed her eyes but that didn't make the pain in her head abate at all. It throbbed like anything.

In her seventeen-going-on-eighteen years, Contrition had never heard of kidnapping. Living on Amos Reeves's farm as she had, news so dire and so rare had never filtered down to her. Nevertheless, she knew that she had been abducted because there wasn't any

other way she could have got where she was now, wherever that might be.

She tried flexing her hands. Her fingers flexed all right, but her wrists were bound tight, and she couldn't make any headway at all in trying to slip her hands out of the cords. She wriggled her feet and found that her ankles were trussed up as tightly as her hands.

She felt like crying from pure frustration, but crying would only make her head hurt worse. Heads were for thinking with, not for crying.

She thought for awhile, as well as she could think with her head throbbing the way it was, and then she began to roll over and over on the floor to see if she could come up against anything that could help her. A piece of broken glass would be nice. Instead, she came up against a stone wall.

She rolled in the other direction. Wherever she was, it wasn't very large, because in no time at all she came up against another stone wall. The floor underneath her was packed earth, she could tell that by feeling of it with her fingers.

She was in a cellar then, but what cellar, and where, and why? Doggedly, she hitched herself around on the floor until she could roll in the other direction, covering the area she hadn't already rolled over. A sharp stick, a stone, anything! No cellar she had ever heard of was completely empty; there had to be something here. All she had to do was find it.

She rolled, and then she rested, and then she rolled. She hitched herself far enough forward every time so that she could roll over new territory. And still there was nothing. If her mouth hadn't been gagged, she would have cussed. Having lived with Amos Reeves all of her life, she knew a passel of remarkable cuss words, even if she wouldn't dast use any of them in front of Dolly. As it was, she had to take it out in thinking them instead of saying them.

Now she was sick to her stomach and her head was whirling. Exhausted, she lay limp, gathering her strength. She wasn't going to lose consciousness again, she wasn't, she wasn't....

Elmer Tibbs was already at the racing ground, filtering himself through the crowds that had already gathered. He kept his eyes and his ears open for any kind of suspicious behavior or snatch of

conversation. His ears were sharp, and he was used to keeping them open, but none of the fragments of conversation he heard led him to believe that he had discovered anything about Contrition's abduction.

Most particularly, he watched out for any exceptionally large wagers on Fly-By-Night or either of the other two entries, to win. Whoever had made away with Contrition must be planning to make a killing when Zeus lost.

"No sign of her, I take it?" he asked as the remainder of the troupe gathered around him to ask him the same thing.

"I'm afraid not." Dolly was determined to be cheerful and put the best face on the situation that she could. "Henry's going to drive, it's what Dianna would want."

Being in the habit of keeping his eyes and his ears open, Elmer was more startled by that statement than any of the others had been. Of them all, he had the best and, as it happened, an entirely accurate notion of who Henry really was and why he was with them. Anton suspected, Jonathan was reasonably sure, Dolly had an inkling, but Elmer knew. He mentally took his hat off to Henry for his courage. All eyes would be glued on Henry as he drove, and some eyes were as sharp as Elmer's and some memories as long.

Henry had already taken Zeus to the starting line where he and the horse and buggy were surrounded by people avid to examine them and make up their minds at the last minute whether or not to change or hedge their bets. Off to one side, Mr. MacIntyre was talking to Justin from his own position in his buggy, Fly-By-Night as sleekly beautiful as Zeus, his hide as black as coal and shining like a diamond, his ears pricked forward, and his head held high.

Mr. MacIntyre raised his heavy eyebrows. "I thought that you said you had a lad who drove for you, Mr. Odets."

"I changed my mind," Justin said. "The lad's a little peaked this morning, he has a stomachache, and fortunately my friend Mr. Davenport offered to take his place. Do you have any objections, Mr. MacIntyre? If you do, I'll be glad to call off my personal bet with you."

"I have no objections. It would be good manners to wish you success, but in this case, as I'll be driving against your entry, I'll wish you to come in second. I hope you've hedged your own bets."

Henry's worry about Contrition still churned inside of him. Grimly, he tried to clear his mind. He'd need all his wits about him if he were to save the Olympians from total financial disaster. Blast Contrition and her overweening confidence, persuading all of them to lay down their last penny on Zeus! And now see what her racing had brought her. Abducted, and no telling what had happened to her! And they couldn't even ask the constable for his help or raise up a massive search party because if anyone else found her, she'd be returned to Amos Reeves. Having all that publicity directed at her was the last thing in the world they could afford.

Why couldn't she have been content just to get away from her stepfather? She was happy with the Olympians. Dolly and the others took good care of her, she had loyal friends and companionship. She could have been safe until such time as his own problems were resolved and he could marry her.

His parents, his mother in particular, would be a problem. The word actress being synonymous with prostitute, Faith Cunningham would be horrified first and then heartbroken until Contrition had time to win her over. His father was schooled in forming his own opinions and apt to hold a poor man from the lowest walks of life, if he were honest, in higher esteem than a wealthy man whose moral scruples the judge held suspect. Ezekiel Cunningham would see soon enough that Contrition was a virtuous girl, the victim of circumstances. And once Ezekiel had accepted her, the whole community would follow, including Henry's mother. All the same, things would be sticky for a while.

At the moment, all that was neither here nor there. Contrition was missing, he was still a fugitive with a price on his head and a rope waiting for him if Leon didn't get his irresponsible self back to this country before he was recognized and taken, and there was a race that had to be won.

In the milling crowd, some of whom were still laying bets, Elmer Tibbs's attention had been caught by three young men, scarcely old enough to be called adults, he judged them to be fifteen or sixteen, no more. They kept close together, obviously cronies. Their clothing was both rough and ragged, their personal cleanliness left much to be desired, and their faces were hardened beyond their years by the

precarious life they led on towpath and bylane, existing by their wits and whatever they could earn by working a day or two when work was available.

An unsavory trio, Elmer thought, but it wasn't their unsavoriness that had caught his attention, it was the excitement on their faces as they still thrust money into men's faces and challenged them to wager their kicks on Zeus at large odds, against their own wagers on Fly-By-Night.

Elmer's suspicions were aroused. These three, he thought, would bear keeping an eye on. In ordinary circumstances, they should have no cause to be so excited, because in ordinary circumstances their pockets would be so empty that they'd have little cause to be concerned with the outcome of a race. An old hand at spotting this kind of riffraff, Elmer suspected that they wouldn't be averse to trying to ensure that the horse of their choice would be a sure winner.

The trio moved on. Elmer also moved on, keeping just far enough behind them so that in their present state of exhilaration they wouldn't notice that they were under surveillance.

The timekeeper appointed by the hastily chosen racing officials gave a signal, and the four drivers maneuvered their horses and buggies into a straight line. Zeus tossed his head and pranced.

"Stop that, Zeus!" Henry commanded. His voice was laden with authority. He expected Zeus to stop. Zeus wriggled his ears, pranced one last time, and then stood quietly, muscles quivering, straining for the takeoff. If Justin had been driving, Zeus would have had some fun with him, but Henry, like Contrition, was another matter.

There was a breathless hush, and then the starting gun went off, and the horses were away, their perfect rhythm and pounding hooves a spectacle to move trotting-race enthusiasts to ecstasy. Henry's hands were firm on the ribbons, holding Zeus steady, as the drivers maneuvered for place and strove to outdistance one another.

All of them were good but it became obvious right from the first that the contest was between Fly-By-Night and Zeus. Ebony, another black, gave them a touch of worry for a moment, but his spurt of speed was short-lived. Fly-By-Night pulled ahead, and the crowd roared. Henry's jaw tightened. Fly-By-Night was a champion, there

was no doubt about it, and it looked as if even Zeus didn't stand a prayer against him.

Zeus's ears flicked. Used to winning with no trouble at all, the trotter hadn't counted on this. He not only hadn't counted on it, he didn't like it. It was an insult to see another horse's tail in front of him. Zeus's stride lengthened, his hooves flashed faster without any hint of breaking from his trot. To break into a gallop would disqualify him on the spot. Henry drew a deep breath and concentrated on holding him steady. Nothing else was necessary.

Watching with her fellow troupers, Lotta's face was pale. She wanted Zeus to win for the sake of her friends, but for herself she didn't care whether he won or not. She only wanted Dianna back safe and sound. The loss of her savings meant nothing, only Dianna mattered. Lotta's lips moved in silent prayer, although she felt like crying because she wasn't sure that her prayers would have any effect, sinner that she was. Why had she let Dolly talk her out of getting saved last night?

In the cellar of the abandoned farmhouse, Contrition was making another attempt to find something with which to free herself from her bonds. The pain in her head had settled down to a steady, throbbing ache. It hurt, but it wasn't going to kill her. The important thing was to free herself and get out of here, wherever here might be.

She had no idea of how much time had passed since she had been set upon and struck unconscious and brought to this place. It might still be early morning, but on the other hand it might be afternoon, the race already over, or it might be the middle of the night. Her friends would be frantic, and Henry would be furious.

She covered another section of the hard-packed floor, rolling. Nothing. Drawing as deep a breath as she could with that confounded gag in her mouth, she rested for a moment, and then hitched and slithered to another position. She rolled, slowly enough to make sure that she missed no square inch; but it was of no avail. There was nothing on the floor, not as much as a stick or a stone, much less a piece of broken glass.

Well, then, she reasoned, she'd have to try something else. Resolutely, she rolled to the edge of the cellar until she came up

against one of the stone walls. Slowly, inch by inch, she positioned herself so that she was sitting with her back against it. Inch by inch, she levered herself up. Twice she slipped down again, twice she started over. She had to get to her feet, she had to hop sideways, jumping with both feet tied together, all around the outside of the walls of the cellar until she came to stairs that would lead up to a door.

It took a long time. She'd never had any idea of how hard it was to hop sideways, especially as every hop jolted her head. But she persisted. She came to the first corner, rested, and started again, careful to keep track. She came to the second corner, and still no door, no steps, nothing. How she intended to get herself up any stairway she might find was something she refused to contemplate until she came to it. First she must find the stairs, and then it would be time to face the problem of how to mount them.

And here they were. Rough, splintered, steep, and with no handrail. Her back to the risers, Contrition sat on them. She hitched herself up one riser, rested, hitched again. Her head was splitting, her muscles ached, her hands were scratched and there was a splinter in her posterior, right through her britches. Now she hurt on both ends.

Three steps from the top, although she had no way of knowing that, there was a missing riser. Contrition hitched, braced against flinching as she came down on the splinter, and her nether end met thin air and caught her off balance; she tumbled back to the bottom and lay unmoving.

The race was over. As it wasn't an official race on an official racecourse, it had been agreed that there would be but the one heat, a full mile in a rough oval, rather than three half-mile heats. People wanted to have the race over with and get to the meeting grounds and take up where they had left off the night before, so a formal race wasn't feasible.

The throngs that had come to bet and witness and cheer on their favorites were laughing, shouting, exulting, or cursing, depending on which trotter had been backed. In the thick of the crowd, Elmer Tibbs took a split second to utter a silent cheer because Zeus had come in first, the rest of his attention being riveted on the trio of

young ruffians he'd been keeping in sight. As their faces fell, as they registered complete and utter disbelief and dismay, as they started quarreling among themselves, Elmer's suspicions jelled. They were the miscreants who had made away with Dianna, and now that Fly-By-Night had lost, they were turning on each other.

Spying Anton and Gavin who were shouldering their way toward their victorious hero, Elmer put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. They looked back and responded to his frantic gestures.

"Those three. Let's grab 'em! I think they took Dianna, I feel it in my bones."

The three striplings' arms were pinned to their sides by three grown men before they had any inkling that they were in peril. Three exceedingly angry grown men, and it didn't matter that Elmer was shorter than the shortest of the young scoundrels because Elmer was wiry and strong and his anger made up for his lack of stature.

"Where is she? What did you do with her?" Anton rasped, and the menace in his voice would have done credit to his most demanding role behind the footlights. "You'd better speak up if you know what's good for you!"

"We ain't done nothin'! We don't know what yer talkin' about!" the leader of the trio spluttered, but his voice ascended into a falsetto squeak that revealed his nervousness.

"Then we'll just have to take you with us and hold you until your memories improve! I don't doubt that we will be able to find some way to jog them into remembering." Anton's voice was more filled with menace than before, and the miscreants paled. It never occurred to them to shout for help. Shouting for help would draw undue attention to them, and the authorities might take it into their heads to jog their own memories into remembering that these boys had been through Pompey before, and their descriptions posted in regard to some petty pilfering. They'd outrun the man who had discovered them at it, but he'd had a good look at them.

Keeping a fast hold on the lad he'd latched onto, Elmer cursed under his breath. Of all the unmitigated bad luck, there was a puke, a bounty hunter, and he was making his way as fast as he could, shouldering through the mob to where Henry was accepting the congratulations of all the countless people who were crowding

around him wanting to shake his hand and run admiring hands over Zeus.

"Hang onto the two you've got!" Elmer barked. "I've got to go!"

Being small and as quick as a cat, Elmer darted through and around the men who were determined to impede his progress. An elbow in a ribcage here, a well-aimed kick on the shins there, and he was through, leaving the puke well behind.

Elmer was gasping as he caught at Henry's arm and mouthed, "Get out of here. There's a puke just behind me!"

It was a good thing that Henry had become adept at reading lips during his apprenticeship when he had been apt to forget his lines and one of the others would mouth them silently, cueing him. He gathered himself together and plunged into the crowd, leaving Justin, who was standing beside him, to grasp the bridle and accept the rest of the congratulations.

"Hurry up, get yourself lost!" Elmer breathed to himself. As if Henry had heard him, he seemed to disappear into thin air.

"You, there! Where'd that man go?" the puke, a well-dressed man of above average height, demanded of Justin.

Having realized by this time what was going on, Justin appeared bewildered. "Do you mean my cousin, sir, Mr. Edward Odets? He has an appointment, I believe. If we're talking about the same man."

"Mr. Henry Cunningham is more like it! You'd best tell me where he's headed unless you want to be held as accessory to helping a fugitive escape!"

Justin drew on every ounce of outraged dignity that he could muster up. "Sir, you are mistaken. The gentleman is my cousin. The Odets are well known. Any embarrassment you might see fit to cause us out of your mistaken notion will not be well received, I can assure you."

Cursing, the bounty hunter hurried away in the direction Henry had taken. But he'd lost time and he'd lost sight of Henry, as well, and although he was nearly certain in his own mind that the man who'd driven the winning horse was Mr. Henry Cunningham, the young gentleman who had called himself an Odets was such a picture

of wealthy respectability that a doubt infiltrated his mind. He'd lost his quarry, there were no two ways about it, but he'd just keep an eye on young Mr. Odets. Sooner or later Mr. Odets's "cousin" would be bound to make contact with him, and the bounty hunter would get a better look.

Elmer was hopping up and down to draw Justin's attention. "Get along back to the campsite. We've caught us a trio of likely suspects in the matter of Dianna's disappearance," Elmer told him. He added, as a regretful afterthought, "Two suspects, because I had to let mine loose when I saw the puke."

And two there were, the third having taken to his heels the instant Elmer had unloosed him. Willy-nilly, the two were dragged off to the campsite, their protestations of innocence falling on deaf ears.

Jonathan, who had remained behind on the unlikely chance that Contrition might come back, rose to his feet when he saw their approach. "What have we here?" he wanted to know.

"The scamps who made off with Mr. Odets's young lad." Anton said. "We're about to question them. I'm sure that you would like to assist us in our questioning, Judge Yeats."

The boys gulped. Jonathan looked every inch a judge, elderly, dignified, impeccably dressed, a stern expression on his face as he regarded the captives. Still they put a brave face on it, maintaining their innocence.

The questioning went on and on, Anton bellowing, Gavin threatening, Justin looking fierce, and Jonathan grave and insistent. It was nearing sundown before the younger and less brave of the two boys took Judge Yeats's words to heart, that it would go harder on them if they didn't confess than if they did, and confessed.

"We never hurt 'im! We only tied 'im up and stashed him till the race would be over, we wuz gonna let 'im go then. We only wanted to win a bundle on the race!"

"In a most reprehensible manner! It is a good thing that you have owned up to your crime. As it is, you will probably get off with merely a few years in prison, rather than hanging." Jonathan spoke with such severity that the rascals quailed, thinking that

they'd be lucky, indeed, to get off with spending a few years behind bars.

They left the campsite in a body, to follow where the two boys led them. All except for Evangeline, who disliked to sully her slippers. To Vangie's credit, she offered to stir up the campfire and start dinner against their return. They'd all be hungry and Dianna would be starved.

It was a longer journey than the Olympians had anticipated, through fields gone largely to brambles until they came to the tumbledown farmhouse. Lotta shuddered as they entered through a doorway that no longer boasted a door, flinching as cobwebs caught in her hair.

The door to the cellar was bolted from the kitchen side. Justin threw back the bolt and opened the door, and only his quickness prevented Contrition from tumbling backwards down the steep stairway again. He grabbed at her and barely managed to hold on to her, dragging her bodily through the door.

Jonathan was already working at the gag in her mouth, and Anton on the cords that bound her hands and feet. The gag came off first, and Contrition glared at them at the dim light that came through what was left of broken and grimy windowpanes.

"Well, it took you long enough!" she croaked, her voice hoarse from all the hours of being gagged. And then, in the next breath, she demanded, "Who won the race?"

"Zeus won," Justin told her, still holding her a great deal more tightly than was necessary. "Henry drove."

"Look, out, those lads are escaping!" Lotta made a grab for them but they eluded her, hightailing it through the doorless door. Anton and Gavin gave chase, but they ran with suspicious slowness. Let them go, they'd served their purpose in leading them to Contrition. No doubt the fear of retribution would dog their footsteps for years to come.

"Henry! Well, I never!" Contrition said. Her wrists were raw, her ankles were raw, her throat was raw, and she ached in every bone in her body. That didn't matter, though. She was rich. They were all rich, and Henry had done it. Come to think of it, where was Henry?

Her anger boiled up in her. He hadn't cared enough about her even to join the rescue party! Drat him to perdition, he'd probably even say that it had served her right to be abducted for going around driving Zeus in trotting races! Just for that, she was glad that he hadn't wagered on the race. It served him right to be poor while all the rest of them were rich!

12

If Henry had been a fugitive before, he was twice as much a fugitive now, because he had no place to stay and no place to hide and very little money on him.

He didn't dare go back to the campsite and rejoin the Olympians because that was where Justin was staying, and the puke would be sure to keep a close eye on Justin for at least several days before he gave up. He couldn't go home, because even after all this time his father's house would be watched, at least off and on, on the chance that he might return there, and it would be just his luck to have this be one of the on times.

To add to his troubles, he had his gnawing worry to contend with. Where was Contrition, what had happened to her? Not knowing was driving him out of his mind, and not daring to go back to the camp to find out if she'd been found was an agony.

He wouldn't be able to leave the vicinity until he'd managed to find out if Contrition were safe, and that added to his danger because he was certain that the bounty hunter wouldn't leave the vicinity either. Danger or not, he'd have to find out before he removed himself to some place where the bounty hunter wouldn't be looking for him.

Once he was out of the crowds that had congregated at the race ground, his danger multiplied. Without the cover of other people, he stuck out like a sore thumb. So he did the best thing possible. He hit for farmlands and took refuge in the first haystack he came to until darkness should fall to cover his tracks.

The day was hot, the hay was prickly, and his hiding place was thoroughly uncomfortable. He had trouble getting enough air through the small hole he left for himself. He was thirsty, and the hay made him sneeze. Henry was not a country boy and the delights of haystacks had always been lost on him.

It was close onto ten o'clock in the evening before he dared to stir from his hiding place. He set out, keeping well off the road and in the shadows as much as possible. When he neared the campsite, his pace slowed, and he crouched in shadows, peering in every direction with his eyes peeled for the slightest man-made shadow or the faintest stir or rustle of movement.

When he was all but on top of the campsite, he dropped to his stomach, like a red Indian in the games he'd played as a boy, and wriggled forward like a snake, trying to be as quiet as a snake and leave no more evidence of his passing.

He took a wide circle around the horses. Horses were apt to whinny. Zeus would certainly whinny at him, and if the bounty hunter were watching, he'd know that someone was approaching the camp. There was still no movement that he could discern, no indication that the camp was being watched.

Cautiously, still flat to the ground and his clothing the worse for it, he came to the tent where Jonathan and Gavin slept, and a little beyond it, Justin was rolled up in a blanket.

Instead of putting his hand on Justin's shoulder, he put it over his mouth. "Hist!" he whispered.

"Huh?" The question was muffled by Henry's hand.

"It's me, Henry. Did you find Dianna? Is she all right?"

Justin nodded twice, once for each question. Henry choked back an all too audible sigh of relief.

"Don't move, don't say anything," Henry whispered. "Pretend you're still sleeping. Tell the others that I'll find them when it's safe. Has the puke been here?"

Justin nodded again. Henry's heart sank. He'd better make tracks. When he left, it was so stealthily that Justin wasn't sure that he hadn't dreamed that he'd been there at all.

Henry's progress out of the campsite was as slow and cautious as it had been getting inside. And it was a good thing that he was as cautious as he was, because he'd just reached taller grass and a clump of brush when he saw that a tree trunk off to the right looked a little thicker, a little lumpier, than it should have. Henry froze. Sweat trickled down between his shoulderblades and off his forehead into his eyes.

A soft snore, hardly more than a gurgle, reached his ears. The puke, stationed where he could keep an eye on the camp, had dozed off.

Once Henry dared to move, it was with twice his previous caution. It wasn't until he was well away from the campsite that he got to his feet and began legging it away from town, to put as much distance between himself, Pompey, and the bounty hunter as he could before morning.

Contrition was all right. She'd been found and she was all right. Henry didn't have to waste his energy worrying about her. He only hoped that the others would have the common sense to put an end to the racing and keep Contrition always within not only their sight but within arm's reach. He'd just have to take it on trust that Dolly would see to that. Dolly was sensible, and she was as fond of Contrition as if Contrition had been her own daughter.

The trouble with all this positive thinking, he thought glumly, was that Contrition was as stubborn as they came. If she wanted to race, she'd race.

It would be on her own head if she came to harm, then, whether from some rascal abducting her or from being recognized and taken. Right now, there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

He fell asleep around two in the morning in a dry ditch. He could be thankful that it was dry. If it had rained recently, he would have spent a much less comfortable night than he actually had, although it was uncomfortable enough, with twigs and sticks poking him in the back every time he turned over and only his

black thoughts and one wandering gartersnake that crawled across his face for company.

He was up and off again at the first rays of the sun, cutting across country this time, avoiding the turnpikes and shunpikes. He walked and he walked and he walked, the sun beating down on his unprotected head. He'd lost his tall hat while he'd been burrowing into the haystack and he hadn't had the wits to search for it before he'd set out again, he'd been so busy worrying about Contrition.

Toward evening he worked up the courage, from sheer necessity, to head for a farmhouse. It was haying time, and if he were lucky, the farmer would give him haypay—food and a place to sleep in the hayloft in return for helping with the scything and pitching.

He was lucky. Henry wasn't a prepossessing specimen by this time, exhausted and disheveled and far from as clean as he usually kept himself, but it wasn't unusual for young men to roam the countryside seeking haypay, and he looked strong. He was invited to wash himself at the pump in the yard which he did with gratitude, drinking almost as much water as he washed himself with.

His plate was laden with fried potatoes and fried chicken and carrots and cabbage and a slab of pie, his cup was replenished with coffee, and he climbed into the hayloft determined to give a good day's work in return for the bounty, starting at sunup. The farmer might have refused to feed him until he'd earned his pay.

He'd be as safe working at haying as he would be anywhere. The bounty hunter would be looking for him on the roads and no doubt would double back to keep an eye on the Olympians, following them from place to place. At least that was what Henry would have done if he were in the bounty hunter's place, and he gave the bounty hunter credit for at least average intelligence, or he wouldn't be able to make a living hunting fugitives.

Before the next day was over, Henry's respect for farmers had skyrocketed. The back of his neck was blistered in spite of the old straw hat the farmer found for him. His hands were raw with broken blisters, his feet were raw with broken blisters, and he was limping so badly that the farmer told him it wouldn't be worth his while to keep him on for another day. The farmer was fair, though. He had his wife give him a

supper worthy of a harvester and allowed him to sleep in the hayloft again that night.

Contrition, Henry thought sourly as he lay in the hay sneezing, would have done better.

In the morning he was given breakfast, out of the pure kindness of the farmer's heart. "You tried hard," the farmer allowed. "But you'll never make a farmer. You'd do better to look for work on the canal."

Henry allowed that he would. He didn't apprise the farmer that he wouldn't dare seek work on the canal, with all its traffic, where someone would be sure to recognize him. He started walking, hoping that some other farmer would be more desperate for help than this one and let him earn another day's haypay, in spite of his blistered hands and limping feet.

Four days and four nights later, Henry was still walking, his stomach fairly comfortable although his feet were giving him fits. Haypay had to be worked for. And to make it worse, every day he worked at haying, his hay fever grew worse.

At the last farm, the farmer's wife had given him a bindle of bread and cheese to carry along, so he wouldn't have to sleep hungry. He saved it to eat before he found another ditch or hayrick to crawl in, looking forward to resting his aching bones no matter the resting place.

Unfortunately, it clouded over before he found a suitable place to shelter, and by twilight a light rain was falling, promising to become a heavy rain any minute now, a promise that was kept.

Soaked, miserable, Henry sought any shelter he could, this time under a huge oak tree that was as dry as any place he could find. The dark had settled in early owing to the clouds, and he sat down gratefully on a large rock that was under the tree close to the trunk.

To his consternation and no little fright, the rock heaved under him and sent him sprawling. "I give up! You've got me! I ain't done nothin', let me go!"

The voice was undeniably masculine and just as undeniably young.

"What the devil!" Henry said.

"I never helped him, he never made me! So you got no call to take me in!"

"I expect you didn't, whatever it was," Henry said. He tried to get a better look at the lad, who appeared to be no more than nine or ten years old, as skinny as they come and cowering with fright.

"You ain't lookin' fer me?"

"No, I ain't," Henry said. "Why should I be looking for you?"

The boy hung his head. "I don't wanna tell."

"Then don't," Henry said. He was ravenous, not having eaten since the breakfast the kindhearted farmer's wife had given him, and having been unable to persuade any other farmer, during his legging it throughout the day, that he could earn his haypay even if his hands and feet were blistered. The bread and cheese the farmer's wife had given him fairly begged to be eaten.

"I expect you're hungry," he said to the lad.

"I'm fair starved."

Henry divided the bread and cheese into two parts, eyed them sadly, and handed over the larger share to the boy. He'd eaten this morning but maybe the boy hadn't.

The bread and cheese disappeared down the lad's throat so rapidly that Henry still sat there with his own mouth open for his first bite.

"Thanks, mister. I don't think I coulda gone on without I had somethin' in my stomach."

"Have you come far?" Henry wanted to know. "Come over here, this spot isn't quite as wet. We might as well settle ourselves, we won't be going any place till morning."

"Seems like I've been walkin' forever. I had to skedaddle, 'cause I couldn't stand it any more. You sure you ain't a bounty hunter?"

"I'm sure. If I saw a bounty hunter I'd run like anything," Henry assured him, perfectly truthfully. "Are you running from a bounty hunter?"

"I run away from my uncle. Even if he never made me help him, I didn't like it, and so I up and run."

Henry's curiosity was bursting at the seams. "And what is it your uncle does that you don't like so much that it made you run away?"

The boy hung his head, and his voice was filled with agonized shame. "He's a resurrectionist. When he needs money real bad."

Henry's blood curdled. It wasn't any wonder that the boy had run away. If he'd been in the boy's place, he would have run away too.

"Those pillrollers, they pay good money to get their hands on a good fresh one," the boy said.

Henry shuddered. "I should think they would. I can't imagine any work more fraught with peril." Digging up a newly buried body and transporting it to a doctor who would do research on human anatomy! Of all the various crimes Henry had ever heard of, that of being a resurrectionist was held to be the most despicable. By and large, all decent citizens would be willing and ready to put a rope around the resurrectionist's neck and spring the trap. Stealing some loved one's body for such a purpose went beyond the limits of decency.

And yet it went on. As the boy said, it paid well, and there were those desperate enough to take the risk, both of being caught at their despicable trade and of burning in the everlasting fires after the law had finished with them.

"You never participated in the deed?"

"Iffen you mean did I help do it, no, I never! Not me, I wouldn't! Onliest I'm gittin' older now, I'll be eleven purty soon, an' when I'm that old Uncle Silas'll likely want me to help him, and I ain't gonna do it."

"Good for you." Henry hadn't thought that the lad was that old. "It would be more convenient for the purposes of conversation if I knew your name."

"I'm Sam."

"And I'm Henry. Listen to that rain! We'll sleep wet tonight."

"Kin I trail along of you for a whilst, just till I git the hang of it?"

"I'll be glad of the company." And a fine pair they'd make, a fugitive from justice and a lad escaping the fate of being forced to be a resurrectionist! But Sam clearly needed a mentor, and he looked to be strong enough for all his small size. Henry certainly couldn't leave him alone to starve.

They set out even before the sun was up, because although the rain had stopped sometime during the middle of the night, they were so wet that moving would be more comfortable than sitting. Sam

trailed along like a lost puppy that had attached itself to the first man who had patted it on its head.

"I reckon I'll just have to git used to bein' hungry," Sam said.

"I expect you will, till you can find steady work. Why don't you try the canal? There's usually work there. You're a trifle young to be a hoggee, but you might hit it lucky."

"I've thought on it. Iffen you hadn't come along, that's where I'd have headed, lessen I'd died of hunger along the way."

"We won't die of hunger. Unfortunately, we won't be able to get work haying till the hay has dried after this rain. But I have a little money in my pocket. When we get near some village or hamlet, if I give you the money to buy us something to eat, will you come back?"

Sam looked at him as if the man who'd patted him on the head had just kicked him and told him to git. Henry could have bitten his tongue off. "Forget I said that," he said. "Of course you'll come back."

Sam came back with bread and cheese and the change from the purchase. There was enough bread and cheese for two meals, three if they apportioned it evenly and didn't make pigs of themselves. They could eke it out with wild berries along the way. If Contrition had been with them, Henry thought, they'd have done a lot better than eking it out. They would have had eggs and a plump hen and vegetables from farm gardens.

He mustn't think about Contrition. It only made him more miserable. She was all right; he was the one who was in trouble. He was glad that he'd met up with Sam. It would take his mind off of things.

But even Sam couldn't keep Henry's mind off the fact that he was here, somewhere on the road with his future more uncertain than ever, and Justin was there with Contrition, seeing her every day. They'd breakfast together, they'd have their dinner and supper together. They'd work out Zeus together. They'd rehearse their parts together, and be together behind the footlights. And Justin, beyond any shadow of a doubt, was in love with Contrition.

Why wasn't I nicer to her, Henry railed at himself, now that it was too late to do anything about it. Why wasn't I kinder to her? And he

knew the answer. He'd been afraid of getting involved, so he'd avoided her when he could and been downright unpleasant to her when he couldn't. He'd treated her like a pesky child. He'd told himself that it was for her own protection because his future was too precarious for him to involve her in it, but now he wondered about that. Contrition was tough, she could roll with the punches.

He's been a fool, that's what he'd been.

But fool or not, he knew that when he got back to the troupe, he'd probably behave in the same way because there was still a price on his head and the chances were about six to half a dozen that he'd end up on the scaffold.

And if that happened, Contrition would go to Albany and be annihilated by the Haywoods. Or Contrition would marry Justin and be annihilated by the Odets. Henry didn't know which of the two alternatives he liked the least.

There was a third alternative. Contrition would marry Justin and they'd live happily ever after. Henry groaned.

"Does your belly hurt?"

Jolted out of his black thoughts by Sam's question, he patted the boy's head. "I am enjoying the most salubrious of health. I was merely contemplating something unpleasant."

"You talk like a gentleman. It seems queerlike to me that you're on the road," Sam observed, and then his face flushed, because it wasn't polite to ask questions that someone might not want to answer. Sam's hair, not that Henry could see it in the daylight, was tow-colored, his eyes were pale greenish-blue, and he had a spattering of freckles. His face was open and honest and naive. Henry had an idea that he'd look something like Justin when he grew up.

"I have my reasons," Henry said. "I'll tell you about it some time."

Sam didn't press the subject. "The sun's shinin' real good now. How long do you reckon it'll take for things to dry out enough so's we kin ask for work at some farm?"

"Probably by nightfall. We'll ask at the first farm we come to when it starts getting dark."

"Will they give us supper, do you suppose?"

"I suppose they will, if they can use us. That's been my

experience." He didn't explain that his experience had been of only a few days' duration. Sam thought that he was well versed in the ways of the vagabond, and he didn't want to disillusion him.

They slept in a hayloft that night, their stomachs full, with promise of a day's work. It seemed good to have company. Henry encouraged Sam to talk, to tell him about being orphaned when he'd been seven and how his mother's brother had taken him in.

His mother, Sam said, had been a shopkeeper's daughter. She'd known how to read and write, but she hadn't had time to teach Sam before she'd upped and died of a congestion of the chest one winter. His father had come from rougher stock; he'd been a drayman in partnership with Uncle Silas. His death, a year after Sam's mother had gone to her reward, had been more dramatic. An ox had fallen on him when he'd been trying to extricate his wagon from the mud. His loss had been a bitter blow to Silas, as well as to Sam. With no partner to help him, and the expense of two burials so close together, Silas had been hard put to make ends meet. But he'd done his duty by Sam, taking him and supporting him to the best of his ability. Sam liked Uncle Silas all right, the only thing he didn't like was the way his uncle eked out his income when hauling jobs were scarce.

"You'll get work on the canal," Henry encouraged him. "It'll be a good life. But remember to save your money so you'll have enough to live on during the winter when the canal is shut down." The plight of the lads, the hoggees who drove the mules that towed the canalboats, was something that caused grave concern among responsible citizens every winter. Some places tried to provide dormitory homes for them, but they hadn't met with noticeable success. "Or you could strike it lucky and find permanent employment on some farm, or as a livery boy, or at a mercantile store running errands and sweeping out. There are all sorts of possibilities for a bright lad like you."

"I ain't worried about that. I kin work, and I will. I don't reckon I'll starve. It's bein' alone that worries me. Not havin' anybody, if you see what I mean."

Not having anybody, Henry thought with sudden insight, must be the greatest poverty of all.

They worked their way across the countryside. Sam was a good

worker, winning the approval of the farmers who took them on. Neither Henry nor Sam could milk a cow—they'd never had occasion to learn—but they could handle almost any other chore. Henry had no doubt that Sam would be able to find enough work to sustain him, but the bleak loneliness in Sam's eyes when he thought about the time when he and Henry would part company got to him.

Two weeks passed, and then three. Henry was getting frantic. What was Contrition up to now? What if she'd already taken it into her head that she had enough money to make her try at Albany, and he wasn't there to stop her? Or try to stop her, which was a different matter entirely. Or what, which was equally hard to accept, if Justin had persuaded her that her future lay with him?

The bounty hunter must have given up by now. In any case, Henry had to chance it. It was time he got back.

Getting back meant risking going into towns and hamlets watching out for the banner that Elmer Tibbs posted where the Olympians were going to play. Henry knew the route they'd be following, and he changed the direction of their travels to bisect it.

"Keep your eyes peeled for a banner," he told Sam. "An oblong banner, red, with a big black O in the center."

"The Olympians!" Sam said, startling Henry. "I know that banner! I even went to one of their plays once. My uncle took me; he'd had a good hauling job and he could afford to waste the money. There was this lady on the stage, she had blond hair, lots of it, and she was that pretty! They put on two plays. I couldn't make sense out of the first one, they talked so funny, but then there was a shorter one that was comical. Are we going to a play, Henry? Only I don't see how we can. We don't have any money."

So Sam must have been in the audience one night, when Henry himself was behind the footlights, with neither of them having any idea that some day they'd be bogieing around the country together, two vagabonds, each running from separate things. Jonathan Yeats would wax philosophical on that subject.

"I have to see someone in the troupe," Henry told Sam. "I may or may not be joining them; it depends on what this person has to tell me."

"Join the troupe? Are you a playactor?"

"That's a matter of opinion," Henry said. "I've been on the stage, with the Olympians."

"And if they take you back, then I won't be seeing you any more." There was such bleakness in Sam's eyes, as the lad swallowed and steeled himself to accept it, that Henry made up his mind on the spot.

"Yes, you will. If I go back, you'll go with me. They'll find a place for you, and if you like the life, you'll be able to stay with them."

"An actor? Me?" The expression on Sam's face was ludicrous. "You're funnin' me! I can't be no actor."

"I cannot be an actor," Henry corrected him. As long as there was nothing else to do while they were legging it in search of the banner, he might as well make a start on teaching Sam correct grammar.

"Is it hard?"

"No, it isn't. Not the acting part. Some of the other things are hard. It's unfortunate that you can't read; that would be a help."

"Aw, I couldn't never learn!"

"You could never learn. But you can, Sam. Anyone can learn to read, and there will be people to teach you."

"Even if I could learn to read, I ain't old enough to be no actor, an' I'm ugly. Anyhow, they wouldn't never take on the nephew of a resurrectionist, even iffen they are actors."

Henry didn't tell them that they had even taken on a man who was wanted for murder. Sam had enough troubles of his own without being burdened by Henry's. He'd just take him along and hope for the best. Dolly's warm heart wouldn't allow Sam to be turned away. He had to make contact with the troupe in any case; what if Eli Pratt had come to bring him a message? What if Leon had come back, or at least been located wherever he was in Europe and told to come back? He'd never find out legging it around the country working for haypay.

It took them another week to come across the banner. Henry kept a wary eye out as they walked through Emmetsville, two shabby, travelworn wayfarers, tired, none too clean, their skins darkened by days of toiling under the hot sun, their hands hardened and calloused

by wielding pitchfork and ax. If the bounty hunter were here, he'd be hard put to recognize Henry. All the same, it behooved him to be careful.

The banner was posted outside a tavern. Emmettsville was a small place, it didn't boast a hall of any kind, and the tavern was the best that Elmer had been able to manage.

Ever cautious, Henry sent Sam into the tavern to ask for Elmer while he himself waited outside and across the street where he couldn't be seen from the windows. "Ask for Mr. Tibbs. A short man, with a face something like a monkey's," he told Sam.

He waited with what patience he could muster, and his patience was rewarded when Sam came back out followed by Elmer. Elmer's face was beaming with a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

"So you're still alive and all in one piece!" Elmer exclaimed, pumping Henry's hand until Henry's shoulder ached. "We've all been worried sick about you. I kept telling them that no bounty hunter was smart enough to come up with you but they fretted, all the same. Especially Dolly and Lotta. Mr. Yeats has shown a great deal of concern, as well."

Henry's mouth tightened. Elmer hadn't said anything about Contrition missing him or being worried. "Have you seen anything of my friend the puke?"

"He hung around for all of three weeks, but we haven't seen hide nor hair of him since. He collared Justin a couple of times to ask his tom-fool questions, but Justin stuck to his story that you're his cousin and you had business elsewhere and wouldn't be coming back. All of the rest of us backed Justin up, and the puke finally gave up."

"When do you expect the troupe?"

"They should pull in late this afternoon. They'll leave the Conniewagons and the horses over on the north side of town; I picked out a good spot for them. But they'll be staying at the inn, we've prospered so, Henry. Dianna and Justin have been raking it in, racing Zeus. The bets aren't as high any more, Zeus's reputation having gotten around, but there's always a few men with more pride than sense who'll make big wagers on their own trotter. Mr. Odets is downright generous, too. He foots the bill for lodgings if the last

stand's take was poor. He and that horse of his are the best thing that ever happened to the Olympians."

"So Justin is still with you."

Elmer gave him a penetrating look and then made his face impassive. "Yes, he is. I expect he'll be with us until the end of the season when there won't be any more chance of racing. He says he's never been so happy in his life."

Henry didn't doubt it, raking in money hand over fist and being with Contrition constantly. At least Contrition hadn't taken off for Albany yet, and that was good news.

"You look the worse for wear. Why don't you and your friend get a room at the inn and get something in your stomachs as soon as you've cleaned up?"

Henry's stomach leapt at the mention of food. He and Sam hadn't eaten since early morning and legging it was hungry work.

"No money. Elmer, has anyone else been around asking for me?" If Eli had contacted the troupe, he might have left some cash, whatever the judge thought he deserved for pocket money, but any amount, no matter how small, would be welcome right now.

"Nobody at all," Elmer said, so cheerfully that Henry could have strangled him. "I'll stand for your room and a meal until the others get in. Mr. Odets will be sure to reimburse me."

Certainly Justin would reimburse him, Henry thought, more sourly than ever. Justin threw money around as if it were pebbles, making a big impression on the Olympians in general and Contrition in particular. By now, he probably had all of them, Contrition in particular, eating out of his hand, thinking that he was the most wonderful thing that had ever come down the turnpike, while Henry had been obliged to use the shunpikes, reduced to being a pauper, as well as leaving the field uncontested to Justin. It galled him to be reduced to accepting money from Justin. Having to accept charity from your arch rival was humiliating, to put the best face on it.

Unfortunately, his inner body didn't give a hang about humiliation, and his outer body was in sore need of soap and water and a razor. His hair needed trimming, his clothing needed cleaning, and his shoes were worn through, and Sam was an even worse case.

He'd have to accept Justin's largess for Sam's sake, even if his pride had been strong enough to let him spurn it for himself.

Putting his pride in his empty pocket, Henry told himself that Justin could afford it and that it was Justin's fault that he was in this predicament in the first place. If Henry hadn't been forced to drive Zeus in that race at Pompey, the bounty hunter wouldn't have seen him and he wouldn't have had to take to the road.

"Give me all you have," he told Elmer. If he was going to be in Justin's debt, then let it be a good one! He was damned if Contrition was going to have her first glimpse of him, after all this time, looking like a tramp!

13

"Miss Dianna, may I talk to you?"

Contrition didn't pause in her task of currying Zeus. Dressed as usual in her boy's outfit, she could have been a lad of thirteen or fourteen, her mop of short-cropped hair curling around her face, her hands hard and roughened not only from her years of heavy toil on her stepfather's farm but from the work she insisted on doing with the Olympians.

She put down the currycomb and picked up a brush. When she'd finished with the brush, she would use a soft, clean cloth to put a polish on the trotter's coat that would blind you when the sun struck it.

"Of course you can talk to me. I'm right here, aren't I? Zeus is looking good, Mr. Odets. Don't you think he's looking good? He's the most beautiful creature I ever saw, I just love him to pieces!" She put her arms around Zeus's neck and planted a kiss in the middle of his forehead.

Justin's face flushed a bright red. Lucky horse! He wouldn't have

thought, up until a couple of months ago, that it was possible for any sane man to be jealous of a horse, but right at the moment he was green-eyed jealous of Zeus. That those delectable lips were being wasted on a horse . . . "He's looking fine. I mean a serious talk, Miss Laverne."

"About what, Mr. Odets?"

"Hang it, will you stop calling me Mr. Odets? You make me feel like I'm seventy years old! I'm only twenty-one, Miss Dianna. Call me Justin, please call me Justin."

"All right, if you'll stop calling me Miss Dianna or Miss Laverne. Every time you call me Miss Laverne I look around to see whom you're talking to." She'd said whom, Mr. Yeats would be proud of her! When she got to Albany, she'd be able to talk fit to knock those toploftical society people right off their chairs.

"Miss Dianna, Dianna, the season is almost over. I've been thinking. I've given it a great deal of serious thought. You shouldn't stay with the troupe after that."

"I wasn't intending to," Contrition said. She didn't elaborate. Her plans to go to Albany and bring her father to ruin had nothing to do with Justin. Mr. Odets, Justin, would go back home to his family, and she'd go to Albany, and she'd miss him like sin but they'd probably never see each other again, and that was the way things were, and there was no use in crying about it.

"Miss Dianna, Dianna, will you come with me when the season is over and I have to return home?"

This time Contrition stopped brushing Zeus, to stand staring at Justin, openmouthed.

"Whatever for, Mr. Odets?"

"Justin, Justin! You promised you'd call me Justin!" Justin's face was a brighter red than ever. "Because I want you to come with me, Dianna! I love you!"

There, it was out. He'd said it, and he'd thought that he'd never get up the nerve.

Contrition closed her mouth. What was she supposed to answer to such a preposterous statement? If she hadn't liked him so well, she'd have smacked him right across his face.

"I'm nobody's bona-roba, Mr. Odets, and I'm not fixing to be!"

Jonathan Yeats would wince at her choice of words, but right now she didn't give a hang about correct grammar. She never would have thought it of Justin, asking her an indecent thing like that!

Justin's face went from red to green to white. "Miss Dianna! I never meant, I had no intention, how could you have thought that I meant . . ." Justin was stammering so hard that he couldn't continue.

"What did you mean, then?" Contrition's eyes met his steadily, without flinching. She was still hopping mad but she'd be interested to hear some kind of an explanation, if he had one. And to think that she'd thought they were friends, to think she'd been so all-fired fond of him, so certain that he was a real gentleman!

"Miss Dianna, I meant that I want you to be my wife, of course. What else could I have meant? I can't conceive of how you could have thought . . ."

"In that case, I'm sorry," Contrition said. "I'm sorry that I thought you meant what I thought you meant, and I'm sorry that I can't marry you. I have other plans, Mr. Odets."

"Justin, darn it! What other plans? You're not intending to marry someone else? It isn't Henry, is it? He isn't even here. For all we know we may never see him again! And he's never said anything, and neither have you, to indicate that there might be an understanding between you!"

There was an understanding between her and Henry, all right, Contrition thought. The understanding was that she'd leave him strictly alone and he'd leave her strictly alone because he didn't like her. He couldn't stand the sight of her! She blinked. She was darned if she was going to cry because she didn't know where Henry was, because she had no idea of why the bounty hunter had been after him, because she didn't know anything except that she wouldn't have given a hang why the bounty hunter was after him, if only he'd liked her a little. Nobody would tell her anything, either because they didn't know themselves or because they didn't want her to know, but she knew one thing well enough, and that was that Henry wanted nothing to do with her, and that was enough for any girl to know and still keep her head high and pretend that she couldn't care less.

"Wherever did you come by an idea like that? It's the most preposterous thing I ever heard," Contrition said.

"I don't know. It just doesn't seem reasonable that Henry could know you as well as he does and not be in love with you. If it isn't so, then I'm glad, because I'm in love with you and I want to marry you."

Contrition considered that. She'd never had anyone in love with her before and she liked it. Besides, Justin was nice, he was the nicest young man she'd ever known. She was fond of him. She might even say that she loved him. Why shouldn't she love him? He was nice to her, he was always polite, he always put her feelings and her wishes first. He never ignored her, or belittled her, or looked at her as if he thought she was a dimwitted child who needed a keeper.

The prospect of being Justin's wife was tempting, to say the least. Why, she'd be a real lady! She'd live in a big house, she'd have a house hussy, she'd take afternoon tea with other ladies, gentlemen would tip their hats to her when she walked down the streets. She'd be respected, she'd be a somebody, and that would show Henry Davenport! She ought to take Justin up on his offer, marry him and live happily ever after, and never think of Henry Davenport again as long as she lived.

"You're thinking about it!" Justin said, his eyes alight with joy.

"I'm thinking about it," Contrition said. She studied Justin while she was thinking about it. He wasn't quite as tall as Henry, but he was nicely built. His shoulders were broad and he was solid and kind and respectful, and he was really kind of cute, even if he wasn't near as handsome as Henry. He had a nice, kind, open sort of face, with no trace of bad temper in it, and no sarcasm. He'd love her and cherish her, and it was so tempting that she almost said yes right on the spot. If she couldn't be happy with Justin, then she didn't deserve to be happy with anybody because a girl would have to be half-witted not to be happy with him. And the nicest thing about it would be to show Henry Davenport that somebody thought enough of her to want to marry her.

"I'll have to think about it some more," she said. She laid aside the brush and picked up the cloth and began to polish Zeus's coat. If she didn't think about it and think about it hard, then she'd be a natural, a moron, that was for sure!

Justin's hand reached out and took the cloth from her. His heart was

in his eyes and his face was so serious that Contrition swallowed, her own heart turning over.

"Miss Dianna, may I kiss you? I think maybe I'm going to go crazy if I don't kiss you."

Contrition started to say no, and then she changed her mind. How could she know she didn't love him unless she let him kiss her? Henry had kissed her twice, and the world had turned upside-down and inside-out, and nothing had ever been the same since, but maybe it would be as nice to kiss Justin as it had been to kiss Henry, and how would she ever be sure unless she did it?

The world didn't turn upside-down, but it tilted a little. It was nice. It was very nice. It was doggoned nice! She liked it. Justin's arms were strong and warm around her, and his body was strong and warm against hers, and Zeus's hide was strong and warm against her back, and there was something about it that was good and right and belonging. Contrition wouldn't have cared if the kiss had gone on forever. It was Justin who finally pulled away.

"Miss Dianna, you've got to marry me! You've just got to!"

"I have to," Contrition corrected him, mentally seeing Mr. Yeats wince. "Only I don't have to, Justin. As I said, I must think about it." Mr. Yeats would sure-fire be proud of her, remembering all the things he'd taught her, in a situation like this. "Never lose control," Mr. Yeats had said. "You can keep your audience in the palm of your hand, no matter what happens, if you don't lose control."

Only it was a lot harder not to lose control when Justin kissed her again. It was even nicer this time.

Gavin Hurley, driving the prop wagon back to the campsite after what they'd need for this evening's performance had been unloaded at the tavern, pulled the team to a halt and sat staring, his mouth agape, at the spectacle of Justin Odets kissing Dianna with gusto, and Dianna kissing him back with equal ardor.

Gavin was mesmerized. He sat there for a long time, still staring. The kiss went on and on, as if Justin and Dianna thought that they were the only two people in the world and that kissing was the beginning and the end of all creation. Whoever would have thought that there was something going on between Dianna and Justin!

Neither of them had ever given an inkling of it. What a sly dog Justin was, Gavin thought, and what a sly puss Dianna was!

Having decided that the kiss had gone on quite long enough, Gavin cleared his throat. Nothing happened, so he cleared it again. He had to clear it a third time, in his most carrying stage voice, before the two lovers heard him and came up for air, Contrition's face flaming at the sight of him and Justin's flaming even hotter.

"Mr. Hurley, we didn't realize that you were here," Justin stammered.

"That is quite obvious. I've brought the wagon and team."

"All right. We'll take care of the horses, you can get back in case they need you," Justin said.

I'll just bet they want me to get back and leave them alone to pick up where they left off, Gavin thought. He lost no time in climbing down from the wagon and legging it back to town, laden with his juicy gossip that would set the entire company on its ears.

Justin's eyes were shining. "Now it's official!" he exclaimed. "You're going to have to marry me or your reputation will be in shreds. We'll announce our engagement tonight when we have our late supper after the performance!"

Contrition wasn't so sure. She still had to do what she had to do, and if she were engaged to Justin, he wouldn't allow her to do it. Men were notional that way.

Justin didn't even know that she was determined to go to Albany as soon as the season was over, let alone why. He'd be sure to object for a number of reasons, not only to protect her but because he certain sure wouldn't want it bruited about that the girl he was engaged to was a bastard.

Not only a bastard, which was bad enough, Contrition reflected, but an actress to boot! The Odets would never stand for it. She'd been with the troupe long enough to know in what regard the general public held actresses. The whole idea was preposterous, it would never work, no matter how tempting it was.

"Justin, you can't marry me just because I can drive a horse. There's more to marriage than that!"

Justin was stricken. "It isn't because you can drive a horse, even

if Zeus does hate me! I love you, I'd love you even if you couldn't drive at all!"

"Zeus doesn't hate you any more." In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Contrition couldn't help giggling. "You've progressed from making him stop hating you to making him like you. He just won't trot fast for you. Fast enough to win races, that is. Besides, I'm not sure that I want to be married."

"But I'm sure! How could anyone be more sure than this?" To demonstrate, he kissed her again, and it was even better than the last time. Contrition wavered. It certainly would be nice to have someone love her just the way she was, have someone who really belonged to her and to whom she belonged. She was almighty tired of being alone, no matter how nice and friendly and familylike the Olympians were.

Besides, once she was married, she'd never have to worry about being apprehended and returned to Amos Reeves. There was a lot in favor of saying yes.

But there was also a lot in favor of saying no. Her real father, for instance, and her determination to bring him to ruin. And Justin's family, who would have a conniption fit at the idea of having a bastard and an actress related to them.

And Henry. That was almost certainly the biggest obstacle of all, because she had a deep-set conviction that as much as she liked Justin, she loved Henry Davenport, and if she loved Henry Davenport in spite of his being so nasty to her, then something had to be wrong with her and she wasn't worthy of marrying Justin, even on top of being a bastard and an actress.

"I'll think about it, Justin," she said, when Justin finally let her go. "I'll have to think about it some more. Right now I have to unhitch the team and hobble them. Do you want to help me, or are you afraid they'll bite you?"

"Of course I'm not afraid they'll bite me!" Justin said indignantly. He fell to work to prove his point. Three minutes later he yelped when the off-horse nipped him. Contrition doubled over with laughter.

"There! That proves that you want to marry me just because I can handle horses! You don't want to be bitten every time you get near one so you need me to do it for you!"

"He didn't bite me, he only nipped at me a little," Justin tried to tell her, his face scarlet. "Darn it, it isn't funny! Darn it, I think he drew blood!"

"It always draws blood when horses don't bite you." Contrition managed to straighten her face and say it soberly. "No, Justin, no more kissing! We've got to tend these horses and get on back to the inn."

Gavin found the entire troupe in the common room when he entered, well ahead of Contrition and Justin. Evangeline was protesting with a great deal of feeling that her part must be expanded, that Lotta's lines could be trimmed to make time for her own to be delivered in their effective entirety. Gavin broke in on her, too full of the importance of what he had to say to observe the amenities.

"We have a romance in our midst," he announced. "Dianna and Justin are enraptured with each other, entirely enraptured judging from the way they were kissing each other when I came upon them. If they could play such a scene behind the footlights, it would bring down the house! Oh, hello, Henry, I didn't see you at first, when did you arrive?"

Shaven, trimmed, bathed, his clothing cleaned and pressed, a new pair of boots on his feet, Henry stood frozen into immobility by Gavin's announcement. Contrition and Justin! His worst fears were realized.

The others were exclaiming with astonishment, pleasure, or displeasure as the case might be, the displeasure all on Evangeline's part.

"I knew it was a mistake to take Dianna in! Now you'll see what will happen. She'll leave us after all the time and trouble we've taken with her and we'll be short of all her parts!"

"Vangie, that's a mean thing to say! Dianna's been worth her weight in gold, and if she's going to marry Mr. Odets and be happy, I'm so glad for her I could cry!" Lotta protested. "Mr. Odets is just the nicest man, it couldn't have happened to two nicer people!"

"Yes, for shame, Vangie! I agree with Lotta. What a surprise this is, but what a happy surprise! To think, our Dianna being married, and into society, at that!" Dolly beamed.

"We'll never see her again after she's married." Lotta's voice

was doleful now. "I'm going to miss her something fierce." She brightened a little as she thought that after Contrition was married, she'd certainly have to attend church regularly, and she'd almost certainly be saved, but even that wasn't enough to make her entirely happy at the thought of never seeing her friend again.

"We'll all miss her, Lotta, but that doesn't mean that we won't be happy for her," Dolly said. "Mr. Yeats, what do you think?"

Jonathan's face was grave, but he didn't voice his opinion, which was much the same as Henry's—that the Odets would make Contrition's life miserable if she were to aspire to marry Justin. "I'm sure we all wish our Dianna every happiness, and Justin, as well," was all he would say.

"I'll drink to that!" Anton said, standing and raising his tankard. The others, even Evangeline, who hesitated a moment, followed suit. Henry almost choked on his ale.

Contrition and Justin ran into Elmer Tibbs and young Sam Smith, whom they'd never laid eyes on before, just as they neared the tavern. Elmer had been supervising Sam's refurbishment, which was now completed. Like Henry, Sam was trimmed, bathed, his clothing had been cleaned, and he sported a new pair of boots, so stiff in their newness that they squeaked with every step he took.

Elmer hailed them, his face beaming. "Henry's back!" he announced. "And he brought this fine lad with him. Young Sam is going to make himself useful by staying with the horses and wagons at our campsites, for starters. I was just about to take him to the campsite now and show him around and get him settled."

Sam thought he'd never seen such a fine-looking young lad in his life, until Contrition spoke, holding out a hand to him that certainly didn't belong to a boy because it was so delicate and well shaped in spite of being hard and calloused. It was a girl, a grown-up young lady for all he—she—was dressed as a boy, with her hair cut shorter than his own.

"Henry back! That's wonderful, that's the best news I've heard in I don't remember when!" Justin's face lighted up. "Dianna, isn't it wonderful news?"

"It's just hunky-dicty!" Contrition said. Her face had paled.

Sam, his young eyes keen and observing, wondered what was the matter with her. Justin and Elmer were both so excited about Henry's return that they failed to notice her perturbation.

"Henry picked Sam up along the way, while he was working from farm to farm for haypay," Elmer explained. "He's going to stay with the troupe, a most welcome addition."

"You'll like it," Contrition told Sam, but her voice was so bleak that it didn't fit her words. "You'll be able to earn your keep, too. We need someone to look after things at the campsites while we're playing."

Justin tugged at her arm. "Come along, Dianna. I can't wait to see Henry and find out how everything went with him! Sam, I'm glad you've joined us. We'll be seeing you later."

Contrition's feet obeyed Justin's command, but draggily. They felt as though they were weighted with lead. On the one hand, she wanted to run as fast as she could to see Henry again, and on the other hand, she wished that she'd never have to lay eyes on him again for as long as she lived.

As it turned out, she didn't see him when they reached their destination because Henry had decided that he'd walk to the campsite, taking a circuitous route to avoid Contrition and Justin. He had to have time to sort out his thoughts, so he'd just spend the night with Sam at the camp. That would give him the time to decide whether he had any right to attempt to interfere with whatever plans Justin and Contrition might have.

As far as his own situation was concerned, he had no right because nothing had changed; he was still a wanted man and even if Contrition would consider having him, how could he ask her to throw in her lot with a man who might well hang before the year was out? With no alternative to offer her, he couldn't ask her to spurn Justin, even if she'd have him, which she probably wouldn't, after the way he'd gone out of his way to avoid her ever since the night she'd been dunked in the horse trough in Rochester and he'd lost his head and kissed her.

All the same, he'd have a talk with Justin at his first opportunity. He'd make sure that Justin was prepared to defy his family for her,

to fight for her. He'd see to it that Justin apprised Contrition of the difficulties she would face so that she could make up her own mind, as well. At the very least he might be able to persuade them to make it a long engagement.

If the engagement were long enough, maybe Leon would be back and his own situation resolved, so that he'd be free to prove the old contention that all was fair in love and war and put up his own fight for the girl he loved. As much as he'd hate to hurt Justin, this was too important to abide by a gentleman's code.

Contrition's emotions, on reaching the tavern only to find that Henry had already left, not caring enough about her even to wait to say hello, were a great deal different. Her chin came up, her eyes smouldered, and her temper was smouldering as well.

This proved it. Henry didn't care a thing about her. She was the biggest dratted fool ever to have been birthed since the beginning of creation, even to have entertained the notion that Henry might care one way or the other what she did or whom she married. And just for that, she'd marry Justin. Justin at least wanted her!

Her head held high, she entered the tavern to a chorus of congratulations. Dolly and Lotta hugged her and kissed her, the gentlemen, even Gavin, wished her happiness and raised their mugs to toast her. It was a heady feeling, being the center of all this attention. A bride-to-be! She was a bride-to-be! Up until the moment when Henry had left without waiting to see her, she hadn't been at all sure that she was going to marry Justin, but she was sure now, and she was happy about it. She was going to be happy about it if it killed her!

She was so happy about it that her performance suffered during the play. She forgot her lines or flubbed them. She missed her entrance cues and came on stage half a minute late while the others had to ad lib to cover her dereliction. Evangeline was furious. Lotta and Dolly defended her.

"What can you expect, as excited as our Dianna is over being an engaged young lady? She has every right to be overexcited!" Dolly chided Evangeline. "She'll settle down in a day or two and be as good as ever."

"That's what I'm afraid of! Being as good as ever with Dianna isn't even good enough to be allowed behind the footlights!" Evangeline snapped.

Evangeline wouldn't have admitted it if wild horses had tried to drag it out of her, but she was so jealous of Contrition's good fortune that she could scarcely bear it. Contrition would be rich, she'd be coddled and pampered, she'd have everything that Evangeline had always wanted and had never had. And all without raising a finger to earn it. She couldn't even act the simplest roles without mangling them! Just because she had a way with horses, Mr. Justin Odets had fallen in love with her, and now he was going to put the world in her lap.

Evangeline was so torn up over Contrition's good fortune and her own lack of it that she deigned to accept the invitation of a gentleman who'd been in the audience to join him for a late, private supper in the tavern's private parlor. She usually didn't do things like that. For one thing, Dolly disapproved of such goings on, and for another, the gentlemen usually weren't easy to handle once they'd had two or three glasses of spirituous beverages. But tonight she needed the reassurance that she was attractive enough to excite gentlemen into desiring her, and tonight Dolly chose to have a blind eye, knowing full-well how Evangeline felt and confident that Evangeline was experienced enough to be able to take care of herself. If Evangeline's behavior reflected on the troupe, it was only for this one night, and Evangeline would get over her pique after she'd made a conquest of her own. It was worth it for the peace it would bring.

Justin, flushed with happiness and victory, wanted Contrition to walk with him after their own late supper, but she begged off.

"I'm all at sixes and sevens," Contrition said. "I need a good night's rest to get myself together again." She let Justin kiss her good night, though, and it was almost as nice as it had been that afternoon. She was only sorry that Henry wasn't there to see it.

Thwarted in his desire to have Contrition alone, all to himself, for an hour or two, Justin allowed himself to be persuaded to join Anton

and Gavin in the common room for a private celebration of his engagement.

"I'm going to bed," Contrition told Lotta. "Are you coming up now?"

"Not our room!" Lotta said, her face a brilliant scarlet. "We can't go to our room yet, Dianna!"

"Why can't we?" Contrition was nonplussed.

"Never mind," Dolly told her. "I'll see if the landlord has another room you and Lotta can take for tonight." She hustled off, leaving Contrition more confused than ever. She returned before Contrition could force an explanation from Lotta. "It's all right. You can take the room at the back, overlooking the side yard. It's sensible of you to retire early, Dianna. It's been an exciting day for you."

"But why can't we have the room the landlord gave us in the first place?" Contrition demanded.

"Because someone else is occupying it," Dolly told her, improvising. "There was a mix-up, that's all. I'll just fetch your things from the other room and you needn't give it another thought."

It wasn't until Contrition was falling asleep in the changed room that she comprehended the reason for the change. "Oh, my!" she said. "So that's why Vangie hasn't come to bed!" No wonder Lotta and Dolly hadn't wanted to tell her; they thought she was an innocent child. Well, if that was the way they wanted it, she wouldn't let on that she'd guessed.

She had more important things than Evangeline's morals to think about right now. She was engaged to be married, and to the wrong man. The happy bride-to-be buried her face in her pillow so that Lotta wouldn't hear her crying.

14

ROLLED up in his blanket close to the fading embers of the campfire, Henry tensed. Sam, rolled up in another blanket beside him, snorted in his sleep, but it wasn't that that had made Henry's hackles stand on end. His ears, all of his senses, were so finely tuned to any extraneous sound or movement that he could sort out what was normal and what wasn't even in his sleep. His lack of alertness when Contrition had been abducted had shaken him so much that his body as well as his mind were determined never to be caught off-guard again.

Somebody was out there. He could sense it, even though he could hear or see nothing, strain his eyes and his ears as he might. He couldn't be mistaken, or was he? No, there it was again! A soft sound, merely a rustling of the grass, but it hadn't been caused by a breeze because there wasn't any.

It had been late before Henry had fallen asleep, and even then his sleep had been restless. The problem of what to do about Contrition had set every nerve in his body on edge. Lying on his back and looking up at the stars, he'd given regretful thought to how long eternity was and how short human life, and what a sin it was to waste even a small portion of that life, let alone all of it. And he'd been certain that without Contrition, his life would be wasted, because there wasn't a doubt in the world that he loved her, that no other girl could take her place.

Loving her, he not only wanted her for himself, a perfectly natural human desire, but he also wanted to protect her from any possible hurt. Convinced that the Odets would hurt her in spite of Justin's best efforts to protect her, it followed that he had to persuade her that

her future lay with him rather than with Justin. And it followed, again, that he'd have to give her a valid reason, and what reason could be more valid than that he loved her himself, and that with him she would be spared the humiliation and frustration of being ostracized by her husband's family and all of his friends?

Contrition wasn't a child, dammit! Just because he'd taken her for a little girl the first time he'd laid eyes on her didn't mean that he had to go on thinking of her that way, and God knew that he didn't, because no normal man could lust after a little girl the way he lusted after Contrition. He didn't particularly like the word, but it was true all the same. He loved Contrition and he wanted her and he had to have her if there was any possible way he could accomplish it. Lust, he told himself, is a natural and normal part of love and marriage. It had to be, or the population of the world would have diminished and died out centuries ago. Physical desire and its fulfillment was one of the most beautiful things in the world, a gift that it would be blasphemous to throw back in the Creator's face.

So now that he had conceded that Contrition was a woman, very much of a woman, it followed that she was not only capable of bearing the truth, but that she deserved to be told the truth and allowed to make up her own mind what she wanted to do about it. Contrition, Henry reminded himself, was the most capable, the most self-reliant, the strongest woman he had ever known.

He didn't feel the slightest guilt about trying to undercut Justin. After all, he'd seen her first. If circumstances had been different, Justin never would have had a chance in the first place because Henry would already have claimed her for his own.

Maybe he was acting like the worst fool in the world to think that he could talk Contrition out of marrying Justin. She had no reason to like him, much less love him, after the way he'd treated her, after the way he'd ignored her, even mocked her and derided her in his attempts to keep his feelings for her at bay. She probably hated him, and he wouldn't blame her if she did. But she hadn't given the impression of hating him those two times he'd kissed her, with her body melting against his and her lips parting under his to return his kisses with a fervor that had panicked him.

All right, so he didn't have the right to ask her to throw her lot in

with his, to wait until this ridiculous murder charge against him was lifted. Right or not, he was going to do it, and he'd do it tomorrow, the moment he saw her. He'd be at the inn well before she got up. He'd make her listen to him if he had to drag her away bodily and hold her forcibly until he'd said what he had to say. After that it would be up to her. It was the biggest gamble he'd ever taken, but he had to take it, win or lose, or else he'd never know whether or not he'd thrown away his best chance for happiness, and hers as well, because he'd been afraid to take the chance.

Once he'd decided, he'd felt an overwhelming relief, even if it was punctuated by anxiety that disturbed his rest. Only it hadn't been any dream that Contrition was laughing in his face that had brought him awake just now, it had been a very definite noise out there in the darkness.

He lay motionless, every muscle tense, ready to spring into action if the need called for it. The rustling was coming closer, there was no doubt of it, any more than there was any doubt that it was a human creature out there creeping up on the campsite.

He could see the man now, crawling along the ground trying to pretend that he was a snake creeping up on a bird. It was too dark to make out any of his features at this distance. The puke, the bounty hunter? Damn the man, wouldn't he ever give up? He must have been mighty cagey to have followed the troupe, keeping it under the surveillance, without any of them spotting him.

He had an overwhelming urge to leap to his feet and make a run for it, but he knew he wouldn't have a chance. The puke would be armed; he'd be shot before he'd gone a dozen steps. So he waited, coiled to roll aside to avoid the puke's lunge and then launch himself at the man.

The intervening moments before Henry judged it to be the right moment to make his move seemed to take eons. He breathed deeply and slowly, gathering his forces, while his heart beat so fast that it was dizzying. A few seconds more, any second now. Now!

He rolled fast, and he launched himself at his would-be captor from a crouching position before he came to his feet. His shoulder hit the man's knees and toppled him, and then Henry was on top, pushing the man's face into the grass. The man's legs thrashed, his

shoulders heaved, but Henry held him fast, shouting at the same time to Sam to wake up and fetch a length of rope from the props wagon.

The man managed to turn his head just far enough to grunt, all the breath knocked out of him, "Is that you, Mr. Henry? Leave me up! Leave me up, dang it!"

"Eli!" Henry got off the prostrate gardener, got to his own feet, and hauled Eli up to stand beside him.

"Gwadalmighty, you fair to caved my ribs in! I feel like they're cracked! Mister Henry, I got a message fer you from the judge. It's a letter, came last week, all the way from Naples, Italy. The judge says he can't make out the sense of it and you'd better see it. Here it is, right in my pocket. It's kind of rumpled, I been carrying it for a good spell whilst I located the troupe. You ain't all that easy to find."

Sam, still staggering from sleep, materialized before them, carrying a length of rope. Believing that his mentor and hero was in danger from this intruder and seeing that the intruder had got loose from Henry, he took it on himself to tackle him around the knees and bring the hapless Eli to the ground again with an outraged cry of protest.

"It's all right, Sam. Let him up. I know him, he's a friend." Henry was already striding toward the embers of the campfire to stir them up and throw on more wood. A little flame thrust up and then another. They multiplied and grew larger. He squatted by the fire, holding the letter close enough so that he could make out the words.

Dear Cousin Henry:

I am writing to you at long last to apprise you of the fact that I am to be the ecstatically happy bridegroom of a lovely lady. Rosalina is the daughter of Prince Alberico Mazzini, and I find myself counting the days and weeks and months until our marriage will take place early next summer.

I know that your pressing affairs in America will prevent you from journeying to Italy to attend the wedding, as delighted as I would be to have you here for that happy event. I am staying at

the prince's estate as his guest until the wedding shall take place, and your letter of congratulation will reach me here.

Assuring you that everything is wonderful and that I could not be more happy, I am

Your loving cousin
Leon

Henry read the letter through twice, his brow furrowed. Leon to be married to the daughter of an Italian prince? Preposterous! Womanizer that he was, Henry couldn't picture Leon marrying any woman at all for at least several more years, after he'd had time to have his fill of all the willing beauties his system could take. And when he did decide to settle down, it would certainly be with an American girl, a New York State girl. This Rosalina must be an enchantress to have captured Leon this easily.

Damn Leon anyway! Why had he had to fall in love with an Italian girl, even if she were a princess, instead of coming home where he was needed? Besides, it wasn't like Leon not to insist that he come to the wedding, pressing affairs or not. He and Leon had been closer than brothers, they'd vowed their boyhood vows never to fail one another, they'd sworn that they'd walk through fire to come to the other's aid in time of need. Henry couldn't conceive of Leon getting married without him there to share in the happiest day of his life.

Happy! That was the clue. Leon had stressed that he couldn't be more happy. And from the time they'd been striplings, Henry and Leon had used this means, in communications with each other, to mean exactly the opposite. Insisting that you couldn't be more happy meant one thing and one thing only. It meant "help! I need you!"

Leon was in trouble. Leon was in such deep trouble that he had sent this appeal for Henry's help all the way across the Atlantic. And if Leon were that deeply in trouble, then Leon could not come home and get Henry out of his own trouble until Henry had traveled to Italy to extricate him from his.

Eli was at his shoulder, fairly hopping from one foot to the other. "The judge, he says you'd better git on over to that heathen place as fast as you kin. The judge, he says that there's a sailing . . ." Eli's

brow furrowed as he strove to remember when the sailing was to be. "I... I disremember, but it's pretty soon. The judge says that you're to come with me and hole up outside of town, and he'll arrange for your passage. I've got me a horse and buggy three miles down the road, hid in a brush-patch. We'd best be gittin' started."

There wasn't any question about it, Henry had to go. But he had to see Contrition before he left. He didn't care if he had to wake her in the middle of the night. With any luck, he wouldn't have to rouse the landlord. He knew which room the girls occupied, its window at the front, and a few discreetly tossed pebbles would rouse them. Contrition slept as lightly as he did, perhaps even more lightly.

"Wait here," he instructed Eli. "Sam, rummage through the supplies and see if you can find something for us to take along to eat. And fetch out my small trunk; it has everything I'll need in it."

He set out for town at a fast lope, and in spite of being in top condition from all his recent walking and farm labor he was winded before he got there. All was dark and quiet except for a horse stamping in the stables. He counted the windows on the second floor. There it was, the third from the right. Searching the ground, he found a few pebbles and tossed them. They hit their mark and fell to the ground. He waited. Nothing happened. Compressing his lips, he groped for the stones and hurled them harder this time, not caring if he cracked the window.

A head poked out. "Who's there, what do you want?"

It wasn't Contrition. It wasn't even Lotta. Evangeline wouldn't have stirred if a rock had fallen right on top of her. The voice was masculine, and the shoulders that almost filled the window certainly didn't belong to a female. What the devil! He knew that this was the room the girls were occupying; he'd seen Vangie and Lotta enter it when he'd gone up to his own room earlier that afternoon.

"What happened to the girls? Where are Dianna and Lotta?"

"You're drunk! A rowdy, rascallion drunk, to wake a decent man in the middle of night searching for girls!"

The gentleman who hurled those words at him was irate, to say the least. He was an honest traveler and he needed his sleep. The man who had no business being in that room at all, having no way of knowing that it had originally been occupied by three members of

the Olympians, and more recently occupied by Evangeline and the gentleman she had entertained earlier in the evening, was filled with outrage at this disturbance. Evangeline, having taken a lingering leave of her admirer, had gone to bed herself down in the new room the young ladies had been allotted, the landlord having the chance to let this one out for the night to another late wayfarer.

"Miscreant! Disturber of the peace! I'm going to send for the constable and have you locked away where you can't disturb decent people in the small hours of the night! You can sleep it off in jail, and I hope that by morning your head will have cleared enough so you'll know better to go carousing in such an unseemly manner!"

The window slammed down, and Henry was left with no doubt that the gentleman meant to do exactly as he said. Henry did the only thing there was left for him to do. He took to his heels.

He covered the ground back to the campsite as fast as he could force his legs to run.

"Sam, I want you to give Miss Dianna a message as soon as the inn rouses in the morning. I want you to get her aside, where nobody else will hear, and tell her that I'll be gone for a considerable time, but I'm not sure how long only that it will be at least three months. You're to tell her that she's to do nothing, absolutely nothing, until I get back, that it's a matter of life and death and that I'll explain everything when I return. Have you got that straight? Repeat it."

Sam repeated it, and then repeated it again to make sure. He had it straight, and Henry knew that he could depend on him to deliver the message verbatim. It was far from as satisfying a solution as he could have wished for, but it would have to do. Now, there being no time to waste, he shouldered his trunk and fell in pace with Eli to where Eli had tethered his rented horse and buggy. His next stop would be Naples, Italy, and Leon had better be there, or Leon would wish that he were dead when Henry caught up with him, which he was going to do if he had to comb every city in Europe.

Sam stood outside the inn while he waited for someone inside to stir. His mouth moved as he waited, as he rehearsed what he'd been instructed to say to make sure that he wouldn't leave out a word. He wondered where Henry had gone and how long it would be before

he saw him again. Three months at least, Henry had said, and that was a deal of time. Whatever it was that had taken him away must be almighty important.

It was hot for this late in the summer, and Sam was thirsty, but he didn't leave his post to go around to the pump to slake his thirst, in case Miss Dianna might emerge from the inn and he would miss her. He was hungry, too, but breakfast would have to wait until he had delivered his message, even if he had to stand here for hours.

A heavy wagon, pulled by two oxen, rumbled down the street that ran in front of the inn. Sam's eyes were filled with sweat, and he didn't make out who was driving the wagon until it was too late. The driver shouted "Whoa!" and hauled on the reins. The oxen were happy enough to stop. The driver, a huge man who towered a fraction over six feet and whose arms and shoulders were heavily muscled, scrambled down from the high seat and clamped his hamlike hand on Sam's shoulder.

Sam's face paled, and he gulped. Struggling was of no mortal use. A slight lad, he had no chance of getting out of his Uncle Silas's grip.

"You young scallawag! I've been looking for you high and low ever since you run off! Come along now, get in the wagon!"

"I don't wanna. I've got me a job, I kin make my own way. You don't hav to take care of me no more!" Sam's efforts to extricate himself from his uncle's grip were desperate but to no avail. The grip only tightened, and Silas picked the boy up and slung him onto the wagon seat.

"Maybe you can get along without me, but I promised my sister that I'd take care of you and that's what I'm going to do. Kin's got to stick together."

"I won't go ahelppin' you do what you do sometimes!" Sam cried.
"I don't do it an' you can't make me!"

"I ain't doin' that no more. I only done it because I didn't have enough haulin' jobs an' we needed the money so's we could eat. But if it bothered you so much that you run off, then I won't do it no more."

"Honest, you ain't?" Sam's face brightened. His Uncle Silas wasn't a bad man. He was rough and unlettered but he was kind to

Sam after his fashion. If he wasn't going to be a resurrectionist any more then Sam would as lief go home. His uncle was right, kin should oughta stick together.

It would have been nice to stay with the Olympians. Mrs. Dolly had already started to mother him and he'd liked that, and Miss Evangeline La Lune was the prettiest lady he'd ever seen, as pretty as he'd remembered her from that one time when he'd seen her on the stage. Miss Lotta had smiled at him as if she really liked him, and Mr. Jonathan had promised to teach him his letters. All the same, his place was with his uncle.

He remembered, then, the message he was supposed to deliver. "I gotta wait for a spell, I got somethin' I gotta tell somebody," he said.

Silas already had the oxen in motion. "No, you ain't. I ain't lettin' you outta my sight agin. Now then, what do you think you're about?" His arm shot out and grasped Sam as Sam tried to jump down from the wagon. "None of that, now!"

As Sam continued to struggle, Silas cuffed him alongside his head to quieten him. He didn't mean to cuff him hard enough to do the boy any harm, but he was stronger than he thought he was. Sam crumpled. Silas examined him carefully, relieved to see that his nephew was breathing strongly, and that he was only stunned. He'd come out of it in a while, and by then they'd be far enough down the road to keep any notion of trying to get back to the inn from tempting the lad into another bid for freedom.

An hour later, when Contrition, the first one up, legged it out to the campsite to check on Zeus and incidentally to face Mr. Henry Davenport and tell him personally that she was going to marry Mr. Justin Odets, she found the camp deserted. There was Henry's blanket by the fire where he always slept when the weather was fine, and there was the blanket young Sam must have slept in, but the blankets were empty and crumpled as though their occupants had risen in a hurry.

Her hands on her hips, Contrition surveyed the campground. Where in tunket could they be? Not seeing hide nor hair of them, she climbed into the props wagon and searched it.

Henry's trunk was gone. And if his trunk was gone, then he was

gone. Contrition's anger threatened to consume her. He'd only just come back, and now he was gone again, without a word to anyone much less to her, and no telling when he'd come back or if he'd ever come back at all.

"Durn it, Zeus, I wish you could talk!" she said, stroking Zeus's satiny neck. "Maybe you could tell me where the unmitigated rascal took off for! Maybe he and Sam talked about it and you heard every word."

She got the currycomb and brush and set to work grooming Zeus to work off her temper. She didn't care if Henry never came back! Why should she care? She was going to marry Justin. Justin wouldn't go disappearing every time she took her eyes off him. Justin was good and he was considerate and he knew how to treat a lady. She hoped that Henry would never come back. She never wanted to see him again.

Drat him, drat him, drat him! She wasn't crying, she was danged if she was crying! She and Justin were going to be happy together and she didn't need Mr. Henry Davenport. Let him stay wherever he'd gone and just see if she cared!

All the same, it was more than an hour before she trusted herself to go back to the inn and face the others. She'd have a smile on her face when she went back, to prove that she couldn't care less that Henry had pulled another disappearing act.

15

CONTRITION left the inn with Justin following her and protesting that he must escort her to the campsite and her telling him, decisively, that he was acting like a ninny. As fond as she was of Justin, she wanted to hide away like a hurt cat and lick her wounds, and maybe

by tomorrow she'd be able to come out into the light again and take up her life where one of its threads had broken off too short ever to be mended. Just herself and Zeus and the wagon horses, that was all she wanted right now.

A wild yelping jerked her from her dark musings, and she whirled, startled, to see two men in hot pursuit of a stray dog. The dog was running for its life, its ribs showing, its coat dull and bedraggled, a medium-sized mongrel with its tail between its legs and saliva dripping from its mouth. One of the pursuing men had a shotgun and he raised it and aimed it at the dog, which was undoubtedly living the last few seconds of its sorry life.

Without thinking, Contrition threw herself on top of the dog as it swerved to run past her, covering its body with her own. "Don't you dast!" she screamed at the man who was bent on shooting it.

"Dianna, get away! Get away from that animal!" Justin shouted, trying to drag her off.

"Drag him away!" the man with the shotgun bellowed. "Can't you see it's mad? It's rabid, that's what it is, I've gotta shoot it!"

"It is not!" Contrition shouted back, clinging to the dog. She struck at Justin's hand. "It's only thirsted half to death, and starved, and scared out of its wits! Dogs slobber like that when they're thirsty, you idiotic galoot!"

"I tell you it's mad!"

"And I tell you it isn't! Justin, dang it, fetch a bowl of water!" Contrition cradled the shaking animal in her arms, soothing it, and it whimpered and pressed against her, its eyes filled with a hopeless hope. Mad? In a pig's eye, Contrition thought. Poor creature, poor, little, lost, homeless, suffering creature! All right, so maybe it wasn't exactly pretty but it couldn't help that, it had been born that way, but that was no reason to go chasing it from pillar to post, intent on murdering it!

"Boy, you're agonna git bit, and you'll die!" the second pursuer shouted. A crowd was gathering, and every one of them seemed to be in accord with the men who claimed that the mongrel was rabid.

Contrition glowered at them. "He isn't going to bite anybody because he isn't mad, he's only thirsty!"

Justin, ashen-faced, appeared with a bowl of water. "For the love of heaven, come away!" he begged.

"Hush up." Contrition said. "And put that bowl right down here."

The dog's tail came out from between its legs. The tail wagged. Feebly, but a definite wag. Contrition stroked its head. The dog's tongue came out and lapped greedily at the water. It lapped and lapped until every drop of the water was gone.

Contrition's look at the would-be assassins was murderous. "There, you see? Mad dogs don't drink water because they can't, everybody knows that! There's nothing the matter with him except he was thirsty, and starved, and now if you *gentlemen* will get out of my way I'll just take him along with me so's he won't go scaring all you brave men to death!"

Justin's face crumpled and he began to shake. "I was never so scared in my life!" he gulped.

"Well, any man who's afraid of nice, gentle horses is likely to be scared of a poor, half-dead critter like this." Contrition couldn't help it, the temptation to take a snipe at Justin's lack of knowledge about animals was too overwhelming after she'd been scared out of her wits too, afraid that this poor little doggie was going to get itself kilt.

Justin flushed. What kind of a man was he, that he hadn't pulled Dianna bodily off the dog at the risk of getting bitten himself. It was his place to protect Contrition, but instead it was Contrition who had protected him, throwing herself on the dog so that it couldn't bite him. Justin felt like crying, but he couldn't. Men don't cry, even when they're so ashamed of themselves and so relieved that a danger was past that they felt like it.

Chagrined, the brave gentlemen, those who had initially chased the dog and the others who had joined them, shook their heads and turned away. "The lad's right," they conceded, shamefaced. "The dog isn't mad. All the same, who'd want it? It's a sorry-looking creature, it'd be better off dead."

"I'd want it," Contrition said, getting to her feet and snapping her fingers at the dog. "Come on, fellow. Come along with me." Looking down at the dog, which had fallen in at her heels obediently, its eyes alight with hope that wasn't hopeless any more, she added, for its hearing only, "I do want you, you sorry fellow, because right now I'm as sorry as you are and we'll make good company for each other. At least you won't go telling on me if I go crying on your

shoulder. You can cry right back on mine, and after we've got the crying out of our systems, we'll figure out what to do next."

She named the dog Joyful. The name didn't exactly fit its appearance, but it fit its attitude now that it had a full stomach and a protector, and a place in the scheme of things because now it had a job to do.

His coat washed and brushed, his ribs hardly showing any more, his brindle coat of medium-long hair gleaming from Contrition's ministrations, Joyful accepted her as his goddess and Zeus as his best friend and the others of the troupe as the subjects of Contrition and Zeus.

As far as she could make out, Contrition allowed that Joyful was probably half German Shepherd and the other half a mixture that nobody ever would determine, except that there must be at least half a dozen breeds mixed in, none of them melding very well with the others. Joyful's head was too small for his thick, powerful neck and shoulders, one of his ears stood up and the other flopped down, his tail was a sorry excuse for a tail except that it had a tuft at the end. His feet were so big that he tripped over them, like a clown wearing oversized shoes.

But more important, Joyful's teeth were equally big for the size of him, a whole mouthful of teeth that he enjoyed showing, while a hair-raising growl rumbled in that thick throat if anybody who didn't belong there approached the campsite, wherever it was. Joyful meant to earn his keep, and earning his keep meant guarding the horses and Conniewagons and all the other property that belonged to the Olympians, as well as the persons and lives of every member of the troupe, Contrition in particular.

"There was never anybody like you when it comes to handling animals!" Justin enthused, his eyes glowing with worshipful admiration as he watched Contrition groom Zeus while Joyful lay under the horse, his nose on his paws, enjoying the shade that Zeus cast. "When we're married and living on the home farm, I'll bet you'll talk the cows into giving twice as much milk and the hens into laying twice as many eggs."

"There's no trick to that," Contrition said complacently. "It's all in knowing how to handle them. Hens mustn't be startled, and the

other creatures just want to know what you want so they can give it to you."

"Only most people don't have the talent for it that you do. You're unique," Justin insisted. "Whenever I think that if I hadn't won Zeus in that card game, and I didn't even want to take him, and I never would have met you if I hadn't taken him, it scares me out of seven years' growth."

"You already have your growth," Contrition observed, practical as always. "And you did win Zeus, and you did meet me, so you might just as well stop letting it scare you."

Justin looked at her with his puppy eyes, disturbed at her matter-of-factness. Everything about Dianna was so matter-of-fact, so decisive. She always knew exactly what to do, and she went ahead and did it with such capability that it left him bewildered and feeling himself lacking. How an orphan had ever grown up with such self-assurance, he couldn't fathom.

He knew that Contrition was an orphan although he didn't know anything else about her, except that she had been raised on a farm. She had never told him the story of her life, not because she was ashamed of it but because she was certain that he, like Henry, would try to persuade her to forget Gerald Haywood and the revenge she meant to wreak on him. Justin had this quaint notion that girls had to be protected, and she didn't want that quaint notion standing in the way of her bringing her father to ruin.

The temptation to marry Justin and forget about her lifelong goal of bringing her father to ruin was strong. Justin's description of the home he'd take her to was something out of a dream. The house was large, he told her, but not too large, there were only eight bedrooms for the family, plus the servants rooms in the attic.

The house was built of red brick, warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and the trim was a sparkling white, and there was a verandah running around the front and two sides. There was plenty of room for entertaining, if they had a notion to have company, and plenty of room to raise a houseful of children.

Justin's family, he had told her, no longer lived on the home farm, but had business interests elsewhere. As he himself had no inclination toward business, it had been decided that he was to take over

the farm and manage it. The land was worked by hired help, over a thousand acres of it. The barns and the other outbuildings were in the best condition, the livestock was prime, the acres under cultivation yielded bumper crops. It was enough to make Contrition's mouth water, to think that by a mere nod of her head she could be the mistress of all that, with a loving husband beside her and a houseful of children to keep her busy.

There was no doubt in her mind that Justin would make an admirable husband, never out of sorts, always deferring to her and letting her have her own way. There was no doubt in her mind that if she didn't marry him, then something must be wrong with her head. As old Orville would have put it, she'd be rowing with one oar out of the water.

Henry didn't want her. Henry so much didn't want her that he'd gone away without a word and not as much as a message had ever come back. Henry was gone and he wasn't going to come back.

As for Gerald Haywood, revenge was sweet, revenge was very much to be desired, but once it had been achieved, what would she do with the rest of her life? And there was always the chance that her attempt at revenge might backfire, as Henry had told her so decisively that it would, and she would be the one who was brought to ruin under the heels of the omnipotent Haywoods. If that happened, then she would have thrown away all that Justin offered her, for nothing.

It was troubling to her when she let herself think about it, and another thing was troubling to her. Justin annoyed her. Not very much, but the way he was always tagging at her heels, the way he was always looking at her so worshipfully, the way he conceded to her every whim, got to be a little boring after a while.

She loved Justin, yes, she did. How could she help but love him? She even had a notion that he'd be an admirable bedpartner, ardent enough to satisfy even the emerging lusts that were tormenting her more and more as she went deeper into the maturity of young womanhood, ready and yearning for a mate.

All the same, it would be annoying to have to say yes to him every night because she'd be afraid of hurting his feelings if she said no. She wouldn't mind saying no to Henry; if she felt like saying no

to him, she'd say it, and he could like it or lump it. Henry wouldn't get a hurt look on his face. He'd want to know why, and if she told him it was just because she felt like saying no, he'd tell her she was a bitch or a witch and they could have a good interesting fight and that would put some spice in life. Justin, Contrition couldn't help thinking, was strawberries and cream, but Henry was good spiced cider that carried a wallop to it.

"Justin, it all sounds wonderful, but you haven't taken your family into account," Contrition reminded him now. "I know what society thinks of actresses. They'll never approve, and then what will you do?"

Justin's face clouded, but only for a moment. He had given his family a good deal of consideration, and although as the youngest and least important of the Odets's sons, he hoped that his marrying someone they wouldn't have chosen for him themselves wouldn't matter too much, he was prepared to stand his ground in the face of their disapproval.

"It wouldn't matter at all. We've plenty to live on through the winter, and come spring we can just go along with the troupe again, winning races with Zeus."

"You'd be alienated from your family, you'd be cut off from your inheritance," Contrition pointed out. "It might not be such a good bargain, Justin. How can you be so sure that you'd be happy with me under such circumstances?"

"Of course I'd be happy! How could I not be happy, if I had you?" Justin's amazement was unfeigned. "I expect I'd miss my family a little, at first, but after a while we'd have a family of our own."

"And go troup ing around with the Olympians, racing Zeus and performing, and dragging our children along with us?" Contrition asked, practical again. "I don't think it would work. Babies are a deal of trouble."

"We'd find a way. I could find a position somewhere, so we wouldn't have to stay with the Olympians after the babies started arriving." Justin was stubborn. "And we could still race Zeus."

Contrition pictured herself racing Zeus when she was eight months along. Her boy's clothes wouldn't fit her very well then . . . And the

mental picture of herself, eight months gone and in boy's clothing, racing Zeus, was so comical that she burst out laughing.

Justin was hurt. Drat it, there was that hurt look on his face again! Why did he always have to be hurt if she didn't turn herself inside out not to do anything that might hurt him? Couldn't she even laugh without him thinking that she was laughing at him?

It was all too much for her, and she finally made up her mind.

"Justin, I want you to go home," she said.

Justin's mouth fell open, and his expression of bewilderment was ludicrous. "Go home! Dianna, what are you talking about? I don't want to go home, unless you go with me!"

"But I'm not going with you. Not right now, at any rate. Getting married means being tied to each other for life; it's too serious a step to take without both of us having time alone to think about it and make sure that it's what we really want. No, don't argue with me, drat it! How can I think straight when you're always right beside me, begging me to marry you? And how can you think straight unless you have time to find out that I'm the one you really want? We have to have some breathing space, dang it! If we're meant for each other, then we'll get married. If we aren't, then it's better that we find it out before we make a mistake."

"But it isn't a mistake! How can you even suggest that it might be a mistake? At least come with me. Yes, that's what we'll do! You'll come with me, and stay with Martha, my older married sister. She'll love having you, she's the nicest sister in the world, and you and my family can get to know each other while you're taking time to think."

"There, you see? I'd have to win them over, and how could I have time to think when I'd have to be thinking about winning them over? No, Justin. Go home! Leave me alone for a while, and I promise that if I decide that I want to marry you, I'll let you know. Leave me the address of that farm of yours and I'll write to you there. And in the meantime, if you decide that you don't want me, it'll be all right. I'll understand and I won't blame you. You have as much right to make sure as I do."

Drat it, why did he have to look at her like that, as if she'd kicked him when he'd been expecting a kiss?

Just for a moment, seeing the misery in Justin's face, Contrition wavered. She was the worst tarnation fool in the world to send Justin away instead of telling him she'd marry him, right now if he wanted it that way. She'd never have another chance like this. She had a sinking feeling that she was throwing her life away and that she'd hate herself for it sometime in the future. But then the mental picture of her father, rich, handsome, arrogant, living on top of the world in spite of his sins, rose up before her, and her moment of hesitation passed.

There was no arguing with Dianna. "Will you kiss me goodbye?" Justin asked.

Without a word, Contrition offered him her lips. Maybe his kiss didn't make the short hairs on the back of her neck stand up and prickle the way Henry's kisses had, but all the same, it was nice. It was so nice that she thought it would be darned good compensation for not being able to have Henry, if and when she ever decided to accept him and if he still wanted her.

When the kiss broke off, she drew a deep, steadyng breath. For a minute there she'd almost blown it. Justin looked at her determined face, and his shoulders drooping, accepted defeat. All the same, if she didn't write him soon, he'd find her wherever the Olympians were.

"Oh, Dianna, you never!" Lotta exclaimed when Contrition told her that she'd persuaded Justin to go home and give her time to think about whether or not she wanted to marry him. "Whyever did you do such a foolish thing? Why, Mr. Odets is the nicest, kindest gentleman I ever knew, he'd be so good to you, and he's rich, too; you'd never have to be an actress again, and if you weren't an actress you could get saved." Lotta was so upset over her friend's foolishness that her eyes swam with tears.

Evangeline was more blunt, and a good deal less kind. "You're more of a simpleton than even I took you for!" Vangie said, looking at Contrition as though Contrition were a half-wit. "It isn't every day that a real gentleman asks an actress to marry him, I can tell you! If my Dermont P. Dimwiddle had been anything like Justin Odets, I never would have left him! Dermont was so stinking pious that we were married for six years before I ever had Jody! And it's a

wonder I even had him after six years! It was like being married to a disapproving, cold, dead fish! Well, if you're fool enough to throw a prize like Mr. Odets away, it's on your own head. It will serve you right if those Haywoods make mincemeat of you, and don't come to me looking for sympathy!"'

"Vangie, don't say things like that!" said Lotta. "Dianna will always have a home with us, no matter what happens! If things turn out badly for her, she can always come back to us. We're her family and that's what families are for, to console each other and help each other! Dianna, how soon are you going to Albany?"

"As soon as Justin leaves and you can finish up my wardrobe. And I'll need a few days of concentrated rehearsing and coaching for the part I'll be playing, too. I want to make sure that I can carry off passing myself off as a young gentlewoman."

"You can, I know you can! You're just wonderful, you're a real quick study, and you can do it without half-trying! You're so smart you could do anything!" Lotta assured her earnestly. "I'll sew as fast as I can. It will only be a few days before everything is ready."

"She'll fall on her face!" Evangeline jeered. "She'll drop her cake in her lap and spill her tea on her hostess the first tea party she's invited to, wait and see. And she'll forget and begin to talk like a farmhussy, or say drat or something equally awful, and it'll be all up with her. And the Haywoods will destroy her in the end, in any case."

"I can take care of myself, and nobody's going to destroy me, much less the Haywoods!" Contrition told the leading lady tartly. "I won't drop my cake or spill my tear or say drat. I'll ask myself every minute what Mr. Yeats would tell me to do, and then I'll do everything right."

Unnoticed by the others, Jody had come into the girls' bedroom on the second floor of the inn. Jody had a way of sneaking around that was positively spooky, always popping up when you least expected him and often overhearing conversations not meant for his ears.

"Dianna's got her cap set for Henry, that's what!" Jody said. "That's why she sent Mr. Odets away. Only Henry doesn't want her so he went away, and he won't ever come back. I wouldn't neither,

if Dianna was going to go throwin' herself at me. Nobody wants to marry an actress, exceptin' Mr. Odets, and he's simple in the head."

"Jody La Lune, that isn't true!" Contrition snapped.

"My name isn't La Lune, it's Dimwiddle, and it is so true! I've seen you lookin' at Henry with sick-calf eyes, only he didn't look back at you, and that's why you're so stupid you're goin' off to Albany. You're as stupid as my mother and all the rest of this stupid troupe!"

Jody was, beyond any doubt, Contrition thought, the most obnoxious little boy in the world. "It's none of your affair!"

"Indeed it isn't!" Lotta cried.

"All the same, the little beggar is right, for once." Evangeline said. "Dianna is being stupid, and I for one think we ought to let her stew in her own juice when everything turns out wrong for her." Evangeline picked up her hairbrush and began the one hundred strokes she never failed to give her golden tresses every night, no matter how tired she was. "It'll serve her right when she ends up as alone as I am."

"You didn't have to be alone, you could have stayed with my father!" Jody said, his voice filled with his eternal anger.

"I'll wash your mouth out with soap!" Evangeline laid down her hairbrush and lunged for him, but Jody was already gone, pelting down the stairs into the common room where Evangeline couldn't follow him with her hair down and in her petticoats. Angrily, she picked the brush up again and resumed brushing her hair.

"He's just like his father, he is Dermont all over again! Maybe I am alone, but I'd rather be alone for eternity than have to live one more day with Dermont P. Dimwiddle!"

"You aren't alone, Vangie." Softhearted Lotta put her arms around her, forgetting her anger of only a moment before. "You have us. And you have Jody."

Evangeline snorted, but she had the grace to pat Lotta's hand. "You and the troupe are a bit of comfort," she conceded. It was hard for even his mother to find anything nice to say about Jody.

For a few minutes the next morning when Justin set off to return

to his family, Contrition was so panic-stricken that she almost begged him not to go. To cover her emotions, she put her arms around Zeus's neck and kissed him goodbye, and there were hot, unshed tears in her eyes as she pressed her face into his sweet-smelling hide. She was going to miss Zeus like sin. She was going to miss the excitement and satisfaction of driving him to the win. And she was going to miss Justin so much that she didn't know how she was going to bear it.

She had a small taste of just how much she was going to miss him when he gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek, all he could manage because the entire troupe was in the courtyard to wish him godspeed. With the exception of Vangie, of course, who wouldn't get up that early in the morning unless the inn were on fire.

"Don't make me wait too long," Justin said, holding Contrition's eyes, his own melancholy. "I don't know why I always let you talk me into doing things I don't want to do."

He climbed up into the buggy and lifted the ribbons. Zeus tossed his head and looked curiously at Contrition, his eyes questioning and anxious.

"Remember what I told you!" Contrition told Justin. "Let him know who's got the ribbons, make him understand what you want from him, and don't take no for an answer."

"Giddap!" Justin said, his voice filled with convincing authority. Zeus stood fast in his tracks. Justin's face flushed with humiliated embarrassment.

"Giddap, Zeus!" Contrition said. "Go on, get out of here! And mind you trot smart!"

Zeus wiggled his ears at her and trotted. How in tunket was Justin going to get along without her? Contrition wondered. She hoped that Justin would be able to persuade Zeus to take him all the way home and not turn around and come back to the inn.

Lotta slipped her hand into Contrition's. "Dianna, I've made up my mind," she said. She shivered under the shawl that she wore around her shoulders. There was a bite in the air, it was already October and the early mornings were crisp. "I'm going to go to Albany with you."

Her statement jolted Contrition out of her self-recrimination for being such a fool as to let Justin go. "My gracious! Whatever put that fool idea into your head?"

"Well, you can't go alone. It wouldn't be decent. People would think that you weren't conventional, a young girl living all alone. But if I go with you, as your househussy, it will give you an air of respectability. You have to be respectable or you won't ever get anywhere near the Hayoods."

"A househussy! I can't let you pretend to be a hired girl!"

"Of course you can. We'll know I'm not; it's only important that other people think I am! And I'll be with you, you won't be lonesome if I'm with you, and it'll be better all around."

Jonathan Yeats spoke up, his voice grave. "Lotta is right, Dianna. I should have thought of it myself. And I too shall go with you, not to stay, but to pose as your attorney and guardian, and search out a suitable abode for you, and deposit your money in a bank, and let it be known that you are my ward and under my protection. It will add a great deal more respectability to your advent in Albany. If you're determined to go through with your plan, then we must make sure that it will have the greatest possibility of success. And now, until the day we leave, I'm going to work you as you've never been worked before! Say 'How do you do, Mrs. Haywood. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance.' No, don't simper! And remember a slight curtsy if the lady to whom you're being presented is older than you are. Since it is through the ladies that you will gain entry to the Haywood home, you must take particular care with your manners toward them."

Curtsy, was it! Contrition bridled, and then swallowed her bile. If that was what it took, she'd do it. All the same, it made her feel like a fool. Getting your revenge was a deal of trouble!

16

CONTRITION's heart was beating with almost unbearable excitement as she and Lotta and Jonathan boarded a six-day line packet at Weedsport. It had happened at last, the day when her face was turned toward Albany, that city of her ultimate goal, the ruination of her father.

But if part of her excitement was from having her lifelong goal so close at hand, a good share of it was because she was going to travel on the Erie Canal for the first time. Clinton's Folly, The Big Ditch, The Governor's Folly, That Damnfool Dig. Even The Ditch of Iniquity, because of the vice that proliferated along its course as rough canalers stamped their reprehensible way of life wherever the canal touched. The names for the unparalleled engineering feat seemed to be endless, depending on the imagination of the person who came up with another definition of the canal, and whether or not he approved of it.

To Contrition, the canal was nothing less than a miracle. If she'd had her say in the naming of it, it would be called the Miraculous Waterway.

Thomas Jefferson, Jonathan had told her, had, when he was president, refused to extend any aid toward the project, declaring that it was nothing short of madness. The madness, one man's dream, that of De Witt Clinton, later governor of New York State, turned out to be the single most important factor in the economy of the young nation, bringing undreamed-of prosperity to thousands upon thousands of people. At least fifty thousand depended directly on the canal for their livelihood, and there were countless thousands of others whose lives and livelihoods it affected indirectly.

Commerce spread westward from the eastern seaboard, new lands were being opened up, and culture and an easier way of life were brought to people who would never have enjoyed such boons without the dream of one remarkable man who refused to take no for an answer.

"There'll never be another man like Clinton," Jonathan told her. "The world lost one of its finest minds at his passing. It's a pity that his aspiration to become president came to nothing because he decided to back Andrew Jackson instead of running himself. That was back in '26. And even at that, he barely managed to win his election as governor because as many as thirty thousand people simply refrained from voting, angered because Clinton was a member of the Masonic Order. William Rochester, his opponent, was also a Mason, and that's the only reason Clinton won at all. It was a narrow squeak, my girl. Always remember, when you're married, as you certainly will be some day, to make sure that your husband votes in every election, because even one vote can be important. If you believe in something, you have to get out and work for it, because one thing is as certain as death and taxes, and that is if you don't get out and vote, the opposition most certainly will!"

The Erie Canal was forty feet wide at the top, twenty-eight feet wide at the bottom, and a mere four feet deep. Contrary to the insistence of its opponents that it would cause death by drowning to untold numbers of people, the only way a man could drown in it was if he deliberately committed suicide by holding his head under.

The canal's construction started on July 24, 1817, in Rome, and it was completed in 1825, and its construction was vigorously opposed by as important an organization as Tammany Hall.

Clinton died of a heart attack in February of 1828 at the age of forty-eight. The state funeral was full of pomp and circumstance, but after the funeral his widow and children were unable to gather together enough money for a plot to bury him in, and a friend, a Doctor Stringer, placed him temporarily in his own family tomb. The Erie Canal was his true monument, grander than any piece of granite or marble that money could buy.

It only went to show, Jonathan told Contrition and Lotta, that any

goal important enough to you could be achieved against overwhelming odds.

It would have been cheaper to travel by line boat, those barges that carried both freight and passengers, but Contrition was determined to make this great adventure one of the first class. Travel by line boats was so cheap at two or three pennies a mile that the canal people had a widely spread motto that no man could afford to walk.

Also, the line boats were not only slower than the packet boats, but they were a deal less comfortable with the passengers crowded together. The food that they had to pay for themselves at the rate of a penny for every mile was apt to be indifferent to inedible; and the going so slow that passengers often jumped off to walk alongside the boat to ease their cramped muscles and give variety to their monotonous journey.

The packets, on the other hand, traveled right along, and meals of the first excellence were included in the fare. Traveling right along meant that at top speed they covered four miles an hour compared to the two miles that the line boats made. Four miles an hour was the greatest speed allowed on the canal, as any faster speed raised waves of sufficient force to damage the canal banks.

For the first few miles, Contrition was saddened in spite of her excitement because she was leaving Dolly and the rest of the troupe behind. Dolly's eyes had been red when she'd enfolded Contrition and Lotta to her bosom to bid them goodbye.

"Mind you, if you get in any difficulties, you let us know, and Anton and I will come flying to your rescue!" Dolly had declared, her voice shaking with emotion. "You'll always have a home with us, and theatrical people stand by their own! If that Gerald Haywood dares to lift a finger to harm you, he'll have me to contend with and he'll be sorry!"

Dear Dolly! If Contrition hadn't loved her own mother so much, she'd have been glad to have been born to Dolly and Anton. As it was, she thanked her lucky stars that their paths had crossed so that she had Dolly for a second and scarcely less loved mother.

But even her sadness at leaving Dolly behind couldn't dampen her spirits for long. She wasn't entirely alone, as she had thought she

would be when she set out to achieve her goal. Lotta and Jonathan were with her, their presence tremendously comforting and supportive. Not that she couldn't have done it by herself but company certainly was nice. And not only that; her purse was a deal heavier than she had thought it would be, with Lotta insisting that she was going to pay her own way in Albany because she would have had to pay her own way wherever she wintered over when the season came to a close, and because, at the last moment, Dolly had thrust still more money at her from the Burnsides' share of what they had won on Zeus. When Contrition had refused to take it, Dolly had given it to Jonathan with instructions that he was to bank it along with Contrition's funds, just to make sure that she wouldn't run short. And she had a sneaking suspicion that Jonathan was going to add to it out of his own winnings, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. The thought was enough to make her want to cry.

The packet they took was drawn not by mules but by horses, fine, strong animals hitched in tandem. The mule teams, Jonathan told her, were always referred to as horses by canalers, or, in a lighter vein, as long-eared canaries.

The hogees, or drivers, for the line boats and other slower craft were boys, in age anywhere from twelve or thirteen up into their late teens. Boys were capable of driving the teams and they didn't have to be paid much, their wages sometimes being as low as ten dollars for the entire season, and plenty of takers.

The packets were a different matter. Speed being of the essence, their drivers were brawny men, aggressive and ruthless, and well able to maneuver their crafts into the most advantageous positions when a lock was approached, and woe betide any lesser driver who attempted to maintain his rightful place in line. Brawls were commonplace. Tales of the brawls at the locks elicited mirth, amusement, or indignation, according to who witnessed them or heard tell of them.

Standing atop the cabin where the hardier passengers chose to perch themselves in order to have a better view of the passing scene, Contrition longed to have a try at being a hoggee herself. She was convinced that she could do it, and she'd certain sure admire to drive

such magnificent animals. They had to be magnificent, the pace being what it was and often called a horse-killer.

Engrossed in watching the driver and noting exactly how he handled the team, she nearly came to grief at the first shout of "Low bridge!" She had to flatten herself on the deck with such haste that her bonnet was knocked askew, and the wind was all but knocked out of her in her attempt to escape being knocked off her feet into the canal as the packet floated under the bridge which was indeed low enough to bring unwary passengers to grief. Actually, she shouldn't have been up there at all, ladies being expected to take their ease in the ladies' cabin, not stand amongst the gentlemen and have to make spectacles of themselves whenever a low bridge was in the offing.

Jonathan helped her to her feet, his eyes twinkling. "I told you that you should be practicing behaving like a lady. Maybe the next time, you'll listen to me."

"The next time, I'll be quicker!" Contrition retorted, not in the least daunted, although two other gentlemen were having a hard time of it concealing their amusement. Drat it all, she expected that she still looked like a little girl in spite of the modish gown and equally modish bonnet she was wearing. It came of being so small. How in thunder was a lady to assert her adulthood if she was no larger than a mite? She raised her chin, gave the gentlemen her most haughty, grown-up glance, and then turned her back on them.

If she couldn't grow taller, she'd just stand taller, and use every ounce of the skills she'd learned behind the footlights to give the illusion that she was taller! Behind the footlights, you could make people believe almost anything, and it shouldn't be that much harder to make them believe it offstage. She drew herself up to her full height and imagined that she immediately gave the impression that she was two or three inches taller than she actually was.

Then she forgot about the impression she was trying to make and she became enthralled with the packet itself. Glory but it was a huge thing, all of eighty feet long and fourteen feet wide. Its cabin had gaily curtained windows and brightly painted shutters, and the paint was sparkling new and bright enough to rival a rainbow.

As the season was drawing to a close, it seemed as if everyone who had any reason for traveling by the canal was doing so while it was still possible, the packet being crowded with as many as sixty passengers by Jonathan's estimation. Soon now the canal would be closed for the winter and drained, and the reeking debris of the summer cleaned from its bottom, all of the garbage and even less savory refuse mantling the countryside along its banks with a fetid odor that caused the local residents to curse the day the first shovelful of earth had been dug.

But none of that unpleasantness was evident today. The crowded canal had a holiday appearance, the packets vying with each other as to brightness of paint and shutters and curtains, of bunting on party boats, with laughter and good cheer on the part of the passengers. Contrition was actually on the Erie Canal, that canal of worldwide fame that had changed the destiny of the entire country!

Jonathan knew everything there was to know about the canal. The Erie Canal was his passion. Some day, when he retired from the footlights, he intended to write a book about it, to glorify his hero, De Witt Clinton. There wasn't a foot of its three hundred and sixty-three miles that Jonathan hadn't made a point of learning about. Without the canal, Jonathan asserted, the country would still be in swaddling clothes, instead of enjoying unprecedented prosperity and expansion.

The traffic the canal carried was incredible. Besides the elite packets, there were numberless line boats, as well as countless barges that transported nothing but freight. From Albany to Buffalo, it bore its tide of riches and emigrants heading west to open up vast stretches of country that would bring still more prosperity.

Bridges abounded, most of them so low that the boats could scarcely float under them. The lowest spanned the banks that ran through farms, placed there so that the farmers could move their cattle from one side to the other, from barn to pasture. A crew member was given the task of shouting "Low bridge!" in ample time for the passengers on the roof to flatten themselves and avoid being knocked into the canal. Such accidents were common in spite of the warnings, to the hilarity of the other passengers and crew. At

the end of a trip, the man who shouted the warnings was usually so hoarse that he could hardly croak.

"At the locks, as many as two hundred and fifty boats a day pass through," Jonathan boasted, as proud as though he had had a personal hand in the canal's construction. "The locks, especially those at Lockport, near Buffalo, and at Schenectady, are marvels of scientific construction. You'll be going through the ones near Schenectady. Because there are so many levels, it's so time-consuming that those in a hurry often leave the packets and arrange for transportation by horse and carriage at that point, but the scenery is so spectacular that I wouldn't dream of letting you and Lotta miss it."

"Some day I'm going to travel the entire length of the canal, even if I have to put on my boy's clothing and get a job as a hoggee to do it!" Contrition said, her face shining. Lotta gasped with dismay, thinking that Contrition just might actually do it. Jonathan also knew that if she took it into her head to do it, no one would be able to talk her out of it, any more than he had been able to talk her out of going to Albany and placing her future in jeopardy by attempting to bring her father to ruin.

Jonathan had given a great deal of thought to the method by which this might be accomplished. "Keep your plan simple," he advised Contrition. "Anything elaborate is bound to meet obstacles we can't foresee. The simpler the plan, the more chance it has of success."

The plan they had come up with was simple in the extreme. Contrition would learn which church the Haywoods attended, and that was the one she would attend. Armed with Jonathan's sanction to her suitability to be a member, she would be accepted and gain her first foothold in the society of Albany.

She would endear herself to the most respectable matrons who attended that church. She would establish herself as a young lady of integrity. Her orphaned state would elicit sympathy and support. However long this would take was of little consequence; she would persevere until it had been accomplished.

During the course of her persevering, she would determine which ladies were the worst gossips. And when the time was ripe, she would confess to the chosen gossip that she was Gerald Haywood's

bastard daughter, come to Albany to bring him to ruin. Tearfully, she would tell that their Christian example had caused her to have a change of heart, and even more tearfully, she would ask them if she were beyond redemption because of her former desire for revenge. She would make sure that the ladies would know every sordid detail, that their hearts would melt with sympathy and burn with indignation at the way her mother had been forced to marry the brute Amos Reeves who had abused her to death.

Gossip being what it was, within hours the entire story would be aired the length and breadth of Albany. Gerald Haywood would be ruined. The fact that she herself would be beyond the pale, a bastard who had come to Albany for the sole purpose of seeking revenge, mattered not a whit. Contrition would quit Albany, her heart soaring with triumph, and either marry Justin and become the lady she had passed herself off to be, or rejoin the Olympians and make a contented life for herself behind the footlights.

But not, Contrition thought, before she had confronted Gerald Haywood in person and told him just exactly what she thought of him and that she had been the instrument of his ruin. Gerald Haywood wouldn't dare lift a hand against her, the story of his infamy being so well known. Her triumph would be complete, and at last she would be free to begin living.

Looking at Contrition, marveling that such a slip of a girl could be so devious, Jonathan was glad that she was not his enemy, nor ever likely would be. He could almost find it in his heart to be sorry for Gerald Haywood.

Having made a sufficient ninny of herself by climbing to the cabin roof where only gentlemen were supposed to be and nearly coming to grief at the first low bridge, Contrition at last consented to descend and deport herself as a lady. She found Lotta perturbed because the ladies' quarters were so small and separated from the gentlemen's quarters by no more than a bright red curtain which would be pinned together at night to afford them privacy for their undressing and their ablutions and whatever sleep they could entice in the hard, narrow bunks.

"We'll survive it, Lotta. It's the men you should be sorry for! They're ever so much more crowded. They'll be stacked up like

books on a bookshelf in those cots, three or four above each other, hanging from the ceiling after the evening meal and the tables have been cleared away. No more than frames, with canvas stretched over them, and not even room to turn over! Mr. Yeats has told me all about it, and I certainly feel sorry for him trying to sleep like that, the men packed in like herrings in a barrel! We'll be sleeping in the lap of luxury, compared with them!"

"I suppose we will. All the same, it hardly seems decent, being so near the gentleman with only a curtain between! What if one of them should peek through?"

"That isn't allowed," Contrition said firmly. "And besides, any eye that tried to peek through would have my finger jabbed in it, so don't worry about it."

Being a packet, the *Water Sprite* had the right of way as it progressed, except for boats they met coming from the east. Downstream boats, or those coming from the east so they were downstream of those traveling toward the east, had undisputed right of way when it came to passing. Contrition marveled at the facility with which such passing was accomplished.

The driver of the upstream boat, their own in this case, dropped the long towline so that it sank to the bottom of the canal, at the same time steering his craft to the opposite bank. The downstream boat was then able to float over the lines and proceed on its way without stopping. The downstream boat had the right of way because it was traveling uphill, and it would have taken a great deal more time and effort to get it moving again than was the case with the upstream boat.

"I could do that, I know I could!" Contrition insisted. "Oh, I wish I'd brought my boy's clothes so I could get out there on the towpath and give it a try!"

"Dianna, you're supposed to be a lady now!" Lotta remonstrated her. "You have to be a lady so you might as well start being one right now, and that doesn't include playing at being a hoggee!"

Contrition was craning her neck to see through one of the cabin windows. "Look! See how fast that boat is coming toward us! Surely it's breaking the regulations! My lands, the horses are going at full gallop, look at the waves it's making!"

At her shoulder, Jonathan was as interested as she was. "It's a hurry-up boat," he explained. "The boat and crew sent full speed ahead to repair a break in the banks. I expect that the muskrats have been at it again; the little beggars do up to fifty thousand dollars a year in damage to the canal banks. One muskrat burrowing in just the right place can cause a ditch bank to collapse, and if the hurry-up boat doesn't get there fast enough, the canal level will go down and every craft on it will be mudlarked until it's repaired and the water is flowing again."

The *Water Sprite* rocked as the hurry-up boat passed it, the *Water Sprite*'s passengers shouting encouragement and exhortations for it to hurry even faster. Being mudlarked, or stuck in the mud at the bottom of the canal, Contrition thought, was one adventure she'd as soon forego. Even as it was, it was a full fifteen minutes before the *Water Sprite* could get under way again after the hurry-up boat had passed it, making waves that took that long to subside.

"How do they know when to set out?" Contrition wanted to know.

"Towpath walkers patrol the banks day and night watching for breaks or signs of trouble." Jonathan, being Jonathan, knew all the answers. "Otherwise, the Erie Canal would be an empty ditch. You've no idea how tender the canal banks are; it takes constant vigilance to keep them in repair so that the canal will hold water."

Supper at the long tables in the cabin was an event to be remembered. Even at the best inns the Olympians had stayed at during their summer tour, there had been nowhere near the abundance or quality of food that was served aboard the packets. Even breakfast had at least two desserts, Contrition learned from Jonathan, who took it all for granted. Each packet had a steward who was allowed one cent a mile per passenger to provide them with all the food and liquid refreshments they were able to consume.

But even Contrition, with her usual hearty appetite, lost interest in the meal when a murmur that spread like wildfire reached her ears at the same time that it reached Jonathan's, causing his usually serene face to go pale and then flush with awed excitement. Jonathan was so moved that he choked on a piece of roast beef and Contrition had to pound his back to keep him from suffocating. His eyes filled with

tears from the choking and pounding, Jonathan ignored his discomfort to gasp, "It's true, it's Tyrone Power! Right there at that other table, it's the great man himself!"

Beside him, Lotta's face had turned almost green in her awe of being in such close proximity with the great actor, one of the foremost of the day. It was fortune too great to be true! Even Contrition, who seldom felt awe of anything or anyone, was awed.

As was to be expected, Mr. Power was surrounded by an admiring audience, everyone wanting to have a word with him so that they could brag afterwards that Mr. Tyrone Power himself had spoken to them. Dazed, Jonathan rose from his place and underwent the indignity of elbowing his way to a vantage point close enough so that he could make himself heard.

"Mr. Power, this is a privilege, a privilege indeed! As one thespian to another, may I be permitted to express my admiration for your unequaled performances? I myself am an actor, although a poor specimen indeed compared to you. I am a member of the Olympians, a traveling troupe, Jonathan Yeats, at your service. You have long been my idol."

"The Olympians?" Whether it were true or not, Mr. Power rose to the occasion. "Indeed, I have heard of them. Adequate performers, I believe, very adequate. Mr. Sommers, would you be good enough to give your place at the table to Mr. Yeats? We two thespians should certainly be seated together so that we can share some of our experiences!"

For a second or two, Contrition was afraid that Jonathan was going to faint at the honor, and she calculated her chances of reaching him fast enough to support him when his legs went out from under him. However, Jonathan, with true actor's aplomb, recovered himself and accepted the proffered place at Mr. Power's elbow with dignity. Beside Contrition, Lotta was still struggling to recover herself.

"To think that I've seen him, to think that I've actually laid eyes on him, to think that all I'd have to do is walk a few steps to be close enough to him to touch him! To think that my feet have trod the same deck that his feet have so recently trod!" Her face paled and her eyes widened as she had another, even more awe-strickening

thought. "Oh, Dianna, what if Mr. Yeats finds the opportunity to introduce us? I'll swoon, I know I will! What if he holds out his hand, what if his hand touches mine!" She sat there holding her hand in front of her face with a dazed expression as though that event had already taken place and she was contemplating never washing that hand again, the hand that Mr. Tyrone Power had touched.

Somehow, Contrition was never sure how, Lotta managed not to swoon when, after supper was over, Jonathan did find the opportunity to introduce his two charges. Mr. Power was gallant. He not only took Lotta's hand but he bowed over it, and although Lotta's face turned so white that Contrition was sure that she was a goner, she managed to gasp out her pleasure in making the great actor's acquaintance.

Contrition herself was filled with a great deal more curiosity than awe, and her eyes were filled with interest as she regarded Mr. Power with a comprehensive inspection. Mr. Power's interest in her seemed almost as genuine.

"An actress? Such a mite of a lady? But such an attractive one! Miss Dianna Laverne, you say? Miss Laverne, if you should ever find yourself in need of employment as an actress, get in touch with me, anyone in New York City will be able to tell you where to find me. I am sure I could find a place for you. A most extraordinary young lady, I'll be bound!"

Lotta looked at Contrition with almost as much awe as she had looked at Mr. Power, and Jonathan beamed as if she were the daughter that he wished she were. Contrition was impressed. Was it possible that she was a better actress than she thought she was, and it showed, or was Mr. Power simply being kind? How she wished that Henry were here! She'd give her right arm if he could have heard what Mr. Power had to say about her.

Contrition would have liked to stay up all night, watching the canal traffic, steeping herself in the excitement of actually being on the Big Ditch on her way to Albany, but passengers were not allowed to spend the night on deck, and the big cabin had to be converted to sleeping quarters, so she was forced to retire when Lotta and the dozen or so other ladies did. The ladies' cabin was

nicely furnished and carpeted, luxury indeed compared to the men's portion of the packet, even though there was only the curtain between them. True to her word, she kept a close eye on where the curtain was pinned together before the lamp was blown out. No eye appeared, however, and at last even Lotta was satisfied that her modesty was in no danger and settled down.

It took Contrition a long time to fall asleep. What awaited her in Albany? How difficult would it be to bring about her father's ruin? That was not the only thing that occupied her mind. Try as she might, she couldn't help thinking about Henry, wondering where he was and why he'd left so precipitately, without leaving as much as a word. Maybe he didn't care enough about her to let her know that he was leaving again almost before he'd got back, but he owed Dolly and Anton, at least, the courtesy of an explanation!

She would not waste her thoughts on Henry Davenport, she told herself, she would not! If she had to think of anyone, she'd think of Justin. What if, by some miracle so miraculous that it couldn't be conceived of, Justin were still loyal to her after she'd confounded her father and blackened her own name in the process? What if he were to defy family and friends and still want to marry her?

She didn't want to think about that now, either. First things first, and first she had to get to Albany, and then she had to bring her father to ruin, and after that would be time enough to think about men at all.

The stretch between Rome and Utica, called the Rome or the Utica "long level," meaning that there were no locks, ran for a distance of sixty-nine and a half miles. Canalers loved these "long levels," where they could make good time with a minimum of problems, and the passengers had the pleasure of drifting peacefully through the countryside with no worries about tie-ups at locks.

It wasn't long after breakfast, with two desserts, before another packet hailed the *Water Sprite* with a challenge to race. Contrition dashed out on deck, filled with excitement at the prospect, even though Lotta tried to hold her back.

The challenge having been accepted, the teams were whipped up and the speed of the packets accelerated to a heady ten miles an

hour, breaking every rule of the canal and posing the danger of excessive damage to the canal banks. Jonathan, who with Tyrone Power was among the excited gentlemen urging their own craft on to victory, told her that at the next lock the captains would simply hand over the ten-dollar fine for excessive speed. Races between packets were the spice of life on the canal and the lockmasters accepted the fines with no harsh words spoken.

Wagers were laid and wagers were accepted. Contrition was caught up in the fever of the occasion and thrust money into Jonathan's hand with the demand that he lay it on the *Water Sprite* for her.

As this was one of the last occasions of the season when a race could be held on the canal before it closed for the winter, the excitement was at fever pitch. Passengers shouted and ordered their drivers to greater efforts. At the height of the short race, with the waves from their passing beating against the canal banks and the noise a pandemonium, passengers from both packets leapt to the towpath to grasp the towlines and add their strength to that of the horses in the effort to draw their own craft ahead.

Contrition, screaming and jumping up and down, poised to make the leap herself, and only Lotta's hands grasping the back of her skirts kept her on board.

"Dianna, you mustn't! Have you taken leave of your senses? You're supposed to be a lady, you'd scandalize everyone on board! What if it were talked about in Albany? And it would be! You attracted a lot of attention when Mr. Power singled you out for his compliments; people would be bound to remember you! You'd have defeated your purpose before you even got there!"

"Drat, drat, drat!" Contrition cried. "I want to get in on it! Why should the men have all the fun? Pull harder, put your backs into it! Oh, how I wish I could get down there, I'd talk those horses into going faster!"

Lotta didn't have any doubt that she would, but she kept a firm grasp on her skirts all the same. "You stay right here and stop that screaming! People are beginning to look at you!"

To Contrition's elation, the *Water Sprite* won even without her efforts to help it. The richer by seven dollars, her face was flushed,

her eyes sparkling, and she was such a portrait of animated young beauty that Tyrone Power thought once again that given the chance, she could make a name for herself behind the footlights in New York City itself. He availed himself of the opportunity to repeat his offer of the evening before, thinking that it would be a pity if only provincial audiences were privileged to enjoy the beauty and vivacity of this extraordinary young woman.

Life on the canal, Contrition was thinking, was certainly exciting. If she didn't have to bring her father to ruin first, and if she didn't owe so much to the Olympians that she was obliged to return to them, she'd find some way to spend at least the next year of her life on the Erie Canal.

The shantyboats intrigued her. On those craft, peddlars and tinkers transported their wares to outlying towns and settlements. Their wives and children traveled with them, making their homes on the boats all during the season. What a wonderful life it must be for the women and children! No tiresome farm chores to be done, nothing but day after day of freedom, long summer days stretching out endlessly before them. The children could go swimming whenever they wanted with no danger of a whipping for not getting the garden hoed or the wood chopped. The women had little to do except prepare meals and contrive to do the family washing, which often stretched colorfully on lines aboard the shantyboats like so many different sized and shaped flags flapping in the breeze. They could step off the boat and go berrying along the canal banks, they could pace along beside it, their bare feet reveling in the freedom from cramped toes.

Her eyes all but popped out of her head when the mule teams were changed. Each boat carried its own mules, and when a fresh team was needed, the hoggee grasped a mule's tail as it went down the gangplank and hung onto it, for no reason on earth that Contrition could imagine. Even Jonathan didn't know why.

Language was rough, and often more than rough, as boats maneuvered for position. Ladies would rush into the cabin, their skirts gathered around them and their faces expressing horror, when expletives flew through the air. Contrition, much against her will, was dragged out of earshot like the other females by a determined

Lotta, who was bent on preserving the illusion that Contrition was a gently reared young lady.

Contrition was beginning to chafe under the restrictions that being a lady imposed. It seemed to her that ladies didn't have much fun. Still, she knew that Lotta and Jonathan were right, so she set about to enjoy herself as much as possible while still acting the part of a lady. If you can't have your cake and eat it too, she told herself, you can at least eat it! When all this was over, when the tomorrow she'd dreamed of for so many years finally came and she had brought her father to ruin, she wouldn't have to behave like a gently reared young lady any more.

And then, by golly, she'd let herself go! She'd manage that season on the canal, she'd get herself up as a boy again and get a job as a hoggee! She'd be the best durned hoggee the canal had ever seen!

And after that, she might, she just might, take Mr. Tyrone Power at his word and get herself to New York City and become a famous actress, and some day Mr. Henry Davenport would be in the audience and he'd realize what a fool he'd been not to snap her up when he'd had the chance. All of the gentlemen would be at her feet, offering her not only dinners and flowers and jewels but marriage as well. She'd be a real somebody, beholden to no one and with the world at her feet. And when Mr. Henry Davenport begged her to marry him, she'd laugh in his face.

All of her fine resolutions flew right out of her head as the packet at last approached the locks near Schenectady. Ordinarily, Jonathan told her, it took a canalboat only three minutes to pass through a lock, but those were ordinary locks, not the complicated ones that switched from one side of a gorge to another, although even these most complicated of locks were usually negotiated smoothly.

This time, things didn't go smoothly. There was a log raft ahead of them, six sections of it, and a pileup of other canal craft piled up behind it. Insults were hurled back and forth, with cries at the rafters of "Get off the canal, you snails!," "Scum of the Erie!," and harsher terms.

The inevitable happened. Fight! Crews spilled off both raft and barge and packet, fists flew, noses were bloodied and broken, teeth were knocked loose or knocked out, bones were cracked or broken.

Contrition had never thought she'd get to see such a whoobub. Standing on deck, she jumped up and down, waving her balled fists. "Go it, show 'em!" she urged on the crew of her own packet. "Watch out for that one there! Oh, you let him get you! What's the matter, are you blind? Get up and fight!"

Lotta clapped her hand over Contrition's mouth. "Dianna! Do stop it, you're making a spectacle of yourself!"

"Nobody's looking at me, they're all looking at the fight! Oh, drat, drat, drat! If I'd only traveled as a boy, then I could have got in on it! I'm missing all the fun!"

It was, as Jonathan said afterwards, a Pier Six fight. In New York City, the canal traffic was allotted spaces at piers five and six, and the battles that took place there between not only canal craft but the crews of canal craft against those of saltwater craft were becoming legendary.

"But even this brawl, as satisfactory as it was, was nothing compared with one I witnessed before I joined the Olympians. Ladies, that was really a fight! There was a tangle at the locks, a traffic jam that was beyond imagination, and all because of a log raft much like the one that caused the trouble here. In the end, the lockmasters simply threw their hands in the air and walked off the job, leaving the canalers to straighten out the mess any way they could. In that instance, it took three days to get the tangle straightened out and for traffic to return to normal."

The things I've missed! Contrition thought, seething with anger at the fate that had decreed not only that she should be a girl, but a girl stuck away on a farm, far away from all the excitement of the world. But she'd make up for it, once she'd brought her father to ruin and she was free to choose her own life. She'd make up for it with a bang that would shake the world!

17

In her wildest dreams of coming to Albany, Contrition had never dreamed of anything like this. Since the advent of the canal, its population had burgeoned, the commerce that the canal had brought attracting settlers until now the metropolis had reached somewhere around thirty-four thousand people, as near as Jonathan could estimate it.

Everything about Albany excited her, from the boat basin crowded with craft of every description, to the neat streets with more houses than she had ever imagined, to the countless shops and churches. Why, if it wasn't for her sense of direction, she could get lost here the first time she turned a corner!

Even with her sense of direction, it was as well that Jonathan had accompanied her and Lotta because he was invaluable as both mentor and guide.

Their first stop was at the New York State National Bank where Jonathan helped her deposit her funds and introduced her to the owner himself, the first step toward establishing her as a young lady of impeccable social standing. He introduced her as his ward, Miss Dianna Verndon, keeping her name as close to her professional name as he could so that she wouldn't have any trouble remembering to respond when she was addressed by this third name she had had in her short life.

"Miss Verndon is, unfortunately, an orphan, whose recently deceased father owned a substantial farm in the northern part of the state, near Watertown. Miss Verndon suffered a severe bout of lung congestion last winter, and it was my decision that she remove

herself to Albany so as to escape the rigors of another such severe winter and so that she will be near expert medical care if she should find herself in need of it," Jonathan told the banker with all of his imposing dignity. He played his part to perfection, as Contrition had known he would. "We will need to find suitable accommodations for her."

The banker suggested that they contact Mr. Thurlow Weed, the owner and editor of the *Evening Journal*. Mr. Weed proved affable and procured for them a list of houses wanting to be let as well as availing himself of the opportunity to make a note to have Miss Verndon's arrival in the city occupy a few lines in his periodical. Such an attractive and delicate young lady would be in need of a reference which his newspaper would be glad to supply. Contrition was already established with an identity, with an entrée to society, and here they had scarcely arrived! Jonathan certainly knew what he was about.

It was as easy to learn the name of the church the Haywoods attended. Joanthan merely asked the editor which church the most elite people of Albany favored, and the editor obligingly named several of the most prominent families along with the churches they favored with their membership. It was so simple that Contrition marveled.

They looked only at two houses, both within walking distance of the Haywoods' place of worship, even in inclement weather. The one they chose was a small white clapboard within Contrition's means but not so small as to hamper her in her social endeavors. It contained three bedrooms as well as a parlor, a dining room and a kitchen and a combination summer kitchen and storage room in the back. The rent was reasonable, even though it would have been entirely beyond Contrition's means if Justin Odets hadn't come into her life, filling her pockets with Zeus's winnings. How naive she had been to think that she could descend on Albany penniless and without references! She blessed both Justin and Jonathan.

If she had been constrained to find employment and gather all the information she would need by herself, it would have taken her years to worm herself into a position from which she could hurt Gerald Haywood, but now it should be only a matter of weeks

before she could bring him to ruin. With her way so conveniently paved for her, it would be nobody's fault but her own if she failed to realize her goal. She couldn't help feeling that fate itself had decreed that she should succeed in her purpose.

Supplies had to be laid in, comestibles and wood and coal. The house was let furnished, but a Franklin stove had to be purchased to heat one of the bedrooms, which Contrition and Lotta would share in order to conserve fuel, the stove being more economical and a good deal more efficient than the woodburning fireplace. The Franklin stove cost twenty dollars but it would be well worth it.

There were all sorts of things to be seen to, but first Jonathan dragged the girls willy-nilly to the corner of Pearl and Steubein Streets, to stand gaping in reverent awe at De Witt Clinton's mansion. Jonathan's face was shining with worship as he feasted his eyes on the home of the great man himself, the greatest man, he averred, in all of the history of the United States.

"Although I have little doubt that if Mr. Clinton had conceived of his dream during George Washington's time, Mr. Washington would have given him the backing that Mr. Jefferson denied. As a surveyor, Mr. Washington would certainly have realized the feasibility of Mr. Clinton's project, and as a man of far-flung vision, he would have approved. Oh well, Mr. Clinton achieved his dream in spite of Mr. Jefferson's short-sightedness; he achieved it against all obstacles, which only goes to prove his greatness."

Contrition and Lotta were suitably impressed, although Contrition preferred the boat basin to Mr. Clinton's mansion. The mansion was an inanimate object, no matter how historical, but the boat basin was alive and vibrant, throbbing with life at every moment of the day and night. If she hadn't been obliged to deport herself as a lady, she'd have spent a deal of her time at the boat basin.

The Schuyler mansion and the Van Rensselaer mansion were also musts, Jonathan insisted, dragging them along to see them before their next objective, that of calling on the Reverend Mr. Obediah Wright, carrying Contrition's well-forged credentials so that when she attended services this coming Sunday she would already be known to him and accorded all the courtesies from the congregation that her status entitled her to.

Only Contrition's training as an actress enabled her to keep her composure when Mr. Wright's stern eye fastened on her as though he were able to see through her skin and flesh directly into the state of her soul. The minister took his time reading the forged letter, purportedly from the minister of the church Contrition was supposed to have attended near Watertown.

Mr. Wright raised his eyes from the letter at last. "Your hair is very short," he remarked, although how he could know that, as her hair was well concealed underneath her bonnet, she had no idea. Doubtless some neighboring housewife had glimpsed her stepping out onto the porch and reported it to a friend, and the rumor had already got as far as the reverend's ears.

"It was necessary to cut it last winter during the crisis of her fever in order to conserve her strength. Her physician recommended that she keep it short to ensure that her recovering strength not be drained during this coming winter," Jonathan explained, ad libbing without the flickering of an eye. The minister accepted the explanation. It was a widespread practice to shear off the hair of females suffering from fever.

"As your hair will be modestly covered during services, it is of little matter."

"Indeed it is of little matter," Mrs. Hannah Wright, the reverend's wife, put in. "I trust that you always wear a bonnet, and never a hat, to church, Miss Verndon. Hats are worldly and not suitable for worship. I trust that this rule also applied in your former church."

"Certainly it did," Contrition managed to say without a pause to betray her lack of such knowledge. "I wouldn't dream of wearing a hat to services! As a matter of fact, I don't even own a hat, only bonnets."

Here, Hannah Wright decided, was a young lady after her own heart. Didn't the letter from her former church state that Miss Verndon was an indefatigable worker as well as a Christian of the first water? Another pair of hands to do the Lord's work was greatly to be desired. There were handkerchiefs to be hemmed up for windows and orphans, there were scarves and caps to be knitted for the unfortunate lads who worked as hoggees on the canal, lads who would otherwise have no scarves and caps in the bitter winter

weather. There was the Prayer Society. Miss Dianna Verndon looked small and delicate, but there was an eagerness in her face, a resolution in her eyes, that promised that she would work to the limit of her strength.

"I will personally see that you are made known to all the members of our congregation." Hannah Wright beamed. "I have no doubt that you will fit into our fold as though you had been born here in Albany. You're handy with a needle, I trust?"

"I'm afraid not, except for the simplest work," Contrition confessed. "But Lotta is an expert, there's nothing she can't do with a needle, and you can be sure that she will be delighted to help. She is instructing me as well, so that it is to be hoped that I will become more proficient in the near future."

Hannah Wright glowed: "Your companion will be as welcome as you are, I assure you. It's obvious that you are both young ladies of outstanding moral values."

"Indeed they are." Jonathan's voice was a trifle testy, as though he took exception to any hint that they might not be young ladies of the most outstanding moral values. Contrition nearly choked. How she'd love to see the expressions on the faces of the reverend and his wife if they realized that at this moment they were harboring three thespians under their roof, two of them actresses whose skirts they would be careful not to brush against on the street for fear of contamination!

Jonathan cleared his throat. "I see that I will be able to return to my duties in Watertown with peace of mind, now that I have placed my ward and her companion under your protection."

"We'll look out for them, you may be assured of that! Indeed we will!" Hannah Wright's blue eyes were shining in her plump face, her motherly friendliness a complete contrast to her husband's austere expression and sharp-planed countenance. What formidable allies they would be when the time came to blacken Gerald Haywood's name! They would without a doubt turn completely against her when she made the truth known, but how much more completely they would turn against her father!

Leaving the parsonage after having been refreshed with cups of weak tea and slices of pound cake so thin they were nearly

transparent, Contrition took a deep breath. It was accomplished, she was established, and now nothing remained but for her to bide her time until it was ripe to strike her father down.

She was actually trembling with anticipation, and the tea and cake didn't set well on her stomach. What she'd like now was a nice, big mug of hearty ale such as she'd had at the inns while the Olympians were laying over for their performances. Sighing, she reminded herself that it would be a long time before she tasted ale again or enjoyed the exhilarating company of such good and lively friends as her fellow thespians. Never mind, it would be worth it. It would be worth it if she had to starve and never taste ale again!

They had arrived on a Wednesday, and Jonathan was to leave Albany to return to the Olympians the following Monday. The season was almost at a close, but a few more performances might be possible, and with the troupe so diminished by Henry and Justin's loss, and now Contrition's and Lotta's, Jonathan's presence was sorely needed.

On Sunday, each of them dressed in their best, they presented themselves at services. They arrived early in order to watch as the other members of the congregation filed into the church, and their strategy paid off when a dowager resplendent in black satin and with a cameo on her ample bosom moved majestically through the open doors with her family in tow, to be greeted by another dowager as splendidly dressed.

"Mrs. Haywood," the second dowager said.

Mrs. Haywood's mouth tightened and her expression soured.

"Mrs. Creighton."

No further conversation ensued, as that would have to wait until the services were over and the congregation had been dismissed. But it was enough for Contrition. Her eyes went immediately to the younger of the two gentlemen who accompanied the first dowager, dismissing for the moment a girl of about her own age and a boy of about twelve who brought up the rear of the entourage.

Her knees were weak as she looked upon her father's face for the first time, and she was grateful that Jonathan was on one side of her and Lotta on the other to give her both physical and moral support.

This was Gerald Haywood, who had betrayed her mother, who had thrust her into a life of hell. This tall, handsome, distinguished-

looking man was her natural father, the man she was going to bring to ruin.

Gerald Haywood was indeed handsome, even now that he had attained his fortieth birthday. Looking at him, Contrition could well believe what her mother had told her, that he had been the handsomest young Corinthian in Albany at the time he'd mistaken her for Effie and had his way with her by force.

Gerald Haywood's shoulders were broad under his expensively tailored coat, he was only a shade under six feet tall, and his body had not put on weight with his years. His hair was fair, the gray scarcely showing in its fairness. It curled over his coat collar in the back and made a most becoming wave over his forehead. His eyes were blue, his eyebrows a little darker than his hair, heavy and with an intriguing upward tilt at the ends. He was clearly a man of consequence and an uncommonly handsome one at that.

Contrition fought against an almost overwhelming urge to confront him on the spot, to step in front of him and call him by name. "Hello, Father," she would say. "I am your bastard daughter, Contrition Reeves." The only thing that saved her was the fit of giggles she had to put down at the thought of the pandemonium that would follow, the shock and outraged horror of not only his wife but of the entire congregation.

Mrs. Gerald Haywood, because the dowager couldn't be anyone else, was built on the lines of an ocean-going ship, and like a ship, she gave the impression of being under full sail as she moved on down the aisle. Unlike many ladies of her proportions, there was no humor in her face, and she made a minute inspection of the other parishioners, approving or disapproving what she saw. What a dragon for any man to be married to, Contrition thought. And she thought, also, that it served Gerald Haywood no more than right. She hoped that his life was already miserable, although not as miserable as she herself intended to make it in the very near future.

John Haywood, and with a shock Contrition realized that the elder Mr. Haywood was her grandfather, was not as tall as his son, and he certainly wasn't as handsome. His face looked as though it had been carved out of granite. His eyes were sharp and cold and hard, his bearing was, well, overbearing! There wasn't a spare ounce of flesh

on him, and his hair was iron gray, cut more severely than Gerald's, as gray as his granite-gray eyes. A hard man, a ruthless man, a successful man, as successful as his hardness and ruthlessness had made him.

The young lad walked with resignation behind the rest of his family, every inch of him proclaiming that he'd rather be anywhere else but here, forced to endure a long and dull sermon when any number of more exciting things could be done on such a fine, crisp, October morning. The lad's hair was dark, and there was a cowlick in the back, defying all of the water that had been used in an attempt to slick it down. His eyes were blue and filled with lively interest, and more than a touch of mischief.

Haywood or not, Contrition felt drawn to him as though they were kindred souls. Her brother, her half brother! She had a half brother! The realization went through her like a shock of ice water down her back. In all of her schemings and plottings to bring Gerald Haywood to ruin, she'd never once given thought to the fact that she might have brothers and sisters. Only her father and the ruination of him had mattered. She had a brother, and she didn't even know his name!

And then, almost as an afterthought, she took notice of the last member of the Haywood family who was attending services this morning. It was the girl, a girl no larger than Contrition but surely within a year of her own age. Her hair and her eyes were brown, a soft, pleasing brown. Her face was heart-shaped, as far as Contrition could see it under her bonnet. She was dressed in the height of fashion, her bonnet alone must have cost a fortune, the kid slippers and the gloves on her dainty hands another, and even Lotta couldn't have achieved the smart fashion of her dress in a month of Sundays. If those weren't real pearls around her neck, the oysters had deserved to be eaten! Small pearls, the strand short as became a young lady of her tender years, but pearls all the same.

I have a sister, Contrition thought. That young lady of fashion, that pampered daughter of our common father, is my sister! That elegant fashion plate is my sister, who never held a hoe in her hand and probably wouldn't recognize one if she saw one, who never had stooped in the burning summer sun pulling weeds from a garden

patch and wielding a hoe until her hands blistered, as calloused as they already were from such brutal labor. She'd never churned until her arms ached, turning milk into butter. She'd never stood over a stove as hot as an inferno, her face running with perspiration, cooking for a brutal farmer who'd only grunt and complain that she was too slow, that she'd overcooked or undercooked what she placed on his plate.

This rich young b— Contrition bit the thought of that word back. After all, she was in church! All the same, this rich, pampered young lady had never swung a scythe in a hayfield or pitched hay or driven a team or chopped wood or milked a cow or gathered eggs. She'd never felt her toes curl at the feel of the frost on the ground before her stepfather had decided that it was cold enough to permit the use of shoes. And certainly, oh, most certainly, she'd never felt the sting of a whip on her back, cutting through cloth and skin!

I hate her, Contrition thought. I should have had all she's had, all of her pampered life! I had as much right to it as she had! I'm Gerald Haywood's daughter too! If he'd married my mother as he should have, I'd be the one dressed in that dress, I'd be the one wearing those pearls, I'd be the Haywood daughter!

She hadn't counted on this. The wave of resentment that flooded through her actually made her sick to her stomach. Look at her, sitting in the Haywood pew, the Queen of the May, and all because she was the legitimate daughter and Contrition the illegitimate! It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, and at that moment Contrition felt a fierce happiness that her half sister would be ruined as badly as her father when Contrition brought her machinations to completion. The proud young lady of society would be brought down a peg then! And Contrition would be triumphant, reveling in the satisfaction of her well-earned revenge!

"Oh, my, isn't she dicty! Isn't everything about her just cruel dicty!" Lotta whispered into her ear as Jonathan piloted them into the church and found them places in the back.

It was a good thing that Contrition had learned the hymns by heart because she wouldn't have been able to concentrate on the hymnal in her hand. She made the responses correctly, also by rote, and she mentally blessed Jonathan for having forced her to prepare for this

moment. All during the long sermon, she heard not one word of the message that the others of the congregation were ostensibly taking to heart.

The Haywoods, the father, the grandfather, the father's wife, the son and the *daughter* were right there in front of her. Her father's voice was strong and full-timbred as he sang the hymns with the confidence of his importance and his place in society. His father's voice was harsh, his wife's voice a high soprano, but it was her half sister's voice that Contrition found herself sorting out from all the others, a sweet, low contralto, its notes so soft that Contrition had to strain her ears to hear them.

She's even beat me out when it comes to our voices, Contrition thought, thinking that it added insult to injury that her own voice was nowhere near as pleasing. And then she was distracted right out of her jealous thoughts because her half brother, that young scamp, trilled out a note so false that it grated on the ears, and she would swear that he'd done it on purpose just to relieve the monotony. Her suspicion was confirmed when she saw the young rascal's ears wiggle. He certainly could wiggle his ears! It was a pity that he'd be caught up in the holocaust when Contrition set fire to their smug, safe world and brought it down in ashes around them!

Obediah Wright was clearing his throat, he was rustling a piece of paper. Announcements were being made, and the paper was the forged letter that would admit her to the sanctified status of membership in this church.

"Miss Dianna Verndon and Miss Carlotta Horton, newly arrived in Albany with proper credentials . . ."

Miss Contrition Reeves, bastard daughter of Mr. Gerald Haywood, newly arrived in Albany with the avowed objective of bringing Gerald Haywood to ruin . . . Contrition's mind reworded what Obediah Wright was saying. Beside her, Lotta reached for her hand and squeezed it. Contrition's heart was beating fast. So soon, now, so soon after so long! But it would have been worth all the waiting, and bringing her half sister down along with her father would be no small part of her triumph.



It was almost too easy, Contrition thought, as she sat stitching up the edges of a handkerchief in company with the other ladies of the Tuesday Afternoon Sewing Society. Her back as straight as the straight-backed chair she was sitting on, she cast covert glances at her fellow members of the Sewing Society.

Mrs. Obediah Wright was there, of course. As the minister's wife, she had to take an active part in every role the ladies of her husband's church played. The dowager Contrition had first noted on her first attendance at church was very much in evidence. Mrs. and Miss Aubury, a mother and daughter alike as two peas in a pod, thin and sharp-featured and with a highty-tighty way of speaking. The Hartley "girls" were there, sisters of sixty-two and sixty-four, sweet-faced and plump and twittering like hens in a chickenyard. And there were several others whom she hadn't sorted out yet, but that would come with time.

Lotta, seated on the outskirts of the circle as befitted her status as Contrition's companion and househussy, was knitting a pair of woolen socks, turning the heel so expertly that the elder, or was it the younger, Hartley girl twittered with approval. Mrs. Bertram Creighton, the dowager next in importance to Mrs. Gerald Haywood herself, the one Mrs. Gerald Haywood had seemed not to hold in high regard, frowned at the Hartley girl for her unseemly twittering.

To Contrition's stunned astonishment, this meeting of the ladies of the Tuesday Afternoon Sewing Circle was taking place in the Haywood mansion. Lotta had nearly backed up and turned to take to her heels when she and Contrition had approached the mansion. Contrition could hardly blame her. The house was indeed a mansion. Four stories tall, it was so big that Contrition marveled that one family, no matter how wealthy, could find use for all of its rooms.

It was a waste, that's what it was, nothing but a sinful waste. It could have been utilized as an inn or some other public place. The autumn-browned grass of the lawn was raked until not an errant twig could be discerned. The windows gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, giving evidence that a small army of houseservants must have perpetually lame shoulders from all that polishing.

Inside, the entrance hall was floored with black and white marble, with not as much as a dusty footprint showing on its glossy surface,

and it must have taken someone hours to polish the prisms of the crystal chandelier.

The parlor to which Contrition and Lotta were conducted was fully as overwhelming. Brocade drapes adorned the tall windows, the furniture was of a quality and style that Contrition had only heard of through Jonathan's descriptions. French it was, she'd be bound, delicate and gilded, with velvet-cushioned chairs and inlaid tables and several lacquered Oriental pieces that attested to the fact that the Haywoods had shipping interests as well as other profitable enterprises. Her mother had told her that the Haywoods were wealthy, but even Contrition's lively imagination had never been able to conjure up a place like this.

Everything about this place proclaimed the wealth and power of its inhabitants, that to be admitted through its doors was an honor not to be taken lightly. Their hostess's manner and appearance bore out that impression. Her graying hair was elaborately dressed, and the lace afternoon cap she wore was so delicate that Contrition would have been afraid to breathe on it. She wore a ruby brooch on her oversized breast, and a ruby ring on her pudgy finger next to her wedding ring.

Elizabeth Haywood was a massively built woman. Her bottom overflowed the chair on which she sat like a queen presiding over her subjects. Nothing escaped her eye, and the Hartley girls cringed when she fixed her gaze on them and fell silent. Contrition would take a great deal of satisfaction in bringing her down a peg, too. She had never met a more thoroughly disagreeable woman, proud, arrogant, believing herself to be better than anyone else.

Phoebe Haywood, Contrition's half sister, couldn't have been more different from her mother. Her face, seen without the concealing bonnet, was heart-shaped as Contrition had imagined. Her brown hair was parted in the middle, swept up in back and with the fashionable curls in front framing her face. When she had stood up to greet her guests, Contrition had seen that they were almost of an exact height, although Phoebe was perhaps half an inch taller. Phoebe's bones were delicate, her figure slender; she certainly hadn't taken after her mother's side of the family any more than had

young David, that twelve-year-old rascal who sang false notes in church and wiggled his ears.

Contrition had learned that there was another son, Walter, who was fifteen and at present going to Colgate in the town of Hamilton, so she could not have a glimpse of him to see if he was as prepossessing as his younger brother. Perhaps he was like his mother instead. She almost hoped so because it would be a pity to do both boys the hurt she was going to do them, if Walter should be as humanly nice as David.

Mrs. Bertram Creighton, Ethel May Crieghton, was holding forth at the moment, and her discourse had nothing to do with sewing for the less fortunate.

"I wouldn't breathe it to a soul, but I know that it will go no further than this room." Her voice was intended to be a whisper but it carried so well that she would have been right at home behind the footlights. Her face, as thin as her scrawny body, was as wrinkled as a dried prune, and gave the impression of being as sour as a persimmon.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it could be true. Mr. Paul Compton, of the shipping magnate Comptons, not only smiled at Mrs. Zelma Withers, but he actually laid his hand on her arm, right on the public street! He engaged her in conversation a great deal longer than was necessary to remark on the weather or the health of her family, and before he left her he patted her hand, all the time beaming at her in the most fatuous way, and him a married man with six children, and Mrs. Withers scarcely more than a bride! He's infatuated with her, there's no doubt about it, and Mrs. Compton and young Mr. Withers would do well to be on their guard lest a scandal erupt right here in Albany!"

"Mrs. Creighton, might it not be that Mr. Compton was only showing a paternal interest in one of his daughter's dearest friends?" Hannah Wright looked distressed. "As Christian ladies, shouldn't we give him the benefit of the doubt?"

"Mrs. Wright, there was no room for doubt, as you would know if you had been a witness to the occurrence as I was! Fifty if he's a day, Mr. Compton is. And Mrs. Withers didn't seem to take his attentions amiss, if I do say so, misliking to cast a reflection on her

character as I do! I'm only happy that neither of them belongs to our congregation!"

Mrs. Ethel May Creighton's glance at Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood was filled with a sly malice. Contrition guessed, correctly as she learned later, that the Comptons were friends of the Haywoods, and Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was only too happy to discomfit her hostess. If Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood was the most disagreeable woman Contrition had ever met, Mrs. Ethel May Creighton ran her a close second.

Phoebe Haywood was silent as she executed exquisitely fine stitches on a dresser runner, a gift for an impoverished widow who would have been more grateful for something substantial, such as food for her fatherless children. There was a little frown between Phoebe's brows, and she looked distressed. No doubt such crass talk offended her delicate ears. Contrition wondered what her half sister would do if she were to be confronted with the randy comments of some of the rougher male members of the Olympians' audiences. No doubt she'd swoon, and take to her bed for a week to recover from the shock.

At precisely four o'clock, tea was served, tea of such an aromatic fragrance that Contrition had never dreamed that such a beverage existed. It was served in cups so delicate that she was afraid to touch hers, fearing that it might shatter. She stifled a giggle as she remembered Vangie declaring that she would most certainly spill her tea in her lap the first time she was invited to a genteel tea party. But for all of Vangie's sharp tongue and sarcasm, the older actress had coached her well. Contrition didn't spill her tea or drop her cup and break it or spill her cake into her lap. She managed as though tea parties were an everyday occurrence in her life. Jonathan would have been proud of her. Lotta, having had a great deal more experience in her roles on the stage, was carrying out her part with an ease than Contrition envied, in spite of being pale and nervous.

If the formidable Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood and the formidable Mrs. Ethel May Crieghton hadn't penetrated her disguise, Contrition was sure that she could deceive anybody. She had passed her first real test with flying colors and she was positively smug in her triumph.

Looking at the formidable Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood, she repressed a shudder and all of her inclination to giggle vanished. The woman was actually her stepmother! To Contrition's way of thinking, that was nearly as bad as having Amos Reeves, may his soul rot in hell, as a stepfather.

The ladies were stirring now, preparing to leave. Contrition and Lotta stood up as well, folding their work and tucking it away in their sewing bags. But Phoebe came over to Contrition with what could only be interpreted as diffidence. Her voice was hesitant, as though she weren't quite sure of herself, in spite of her exalted position as the daughter of this house.

"Miss Verndon, my grandmother asked me particularly to bring you upstairs to see her before you leave. She's crippled, and seldom comes downstairs, but she would like to meet you, as I told her about you after services on Sunday."

Grandmother? Contrition was startled, although she didn't know why she hadn't realized that if John Haywood was her grandfather, then she must have a grandmother as well. Another arrogant, supercilious Haywood to contend with! But there was no way to get out of it, and besides, she was curious.

Lotta sat down again and folded her hands in her lap. "I'll wait for you, Miss Verndon."

Miss Verndon! Contrition wondered if she'd ever get used to hearing Lotta address her in that manner when they were in public. It still didn't seem right, letting Lotta play the part of a companion househussy!

The two girls, with Phoebe leading, ascended a magnificent staircase and walked along a hallway that branched off to the left and back of the house. Pausing before a closed door, Phoebe knocked, a gentle tap, and called, "Grandmother, I've brought Miss Verndon, as you asked."

"Well, don't just stand out there, bring her in!" The reply was tart and Contrition's heart sank. Another Elizabeth Haywood, she'd be bound, even if the woman was crippled! From behind the closed door, she sounded like a shrew.

Contrition blinked when Phoebe opened the door, and they entered a sitting room that had an open door connecting to a bedroom at the

far side. The hallway had been dim, but the sitting room was flooded with light, every drape being drawn back as far as it would go in order to admit the sun. The rooms looked out onto the back garden, and an invalid's chair was pulled close to one of the windows. The woman who was occupying it held an open book in her hands.

Formidable! Why, the woman was tiny! Her white hair, the most beautiful white hair Contrition had ever seen, was elaborately dressed high on her head, but without any of the silly, sausage curls that women of all ages affected these days, no matter how unbecoming they might be. Diamond earrings gleamed in the exposed earlobes. The woman's eyes were bright blue and piercing, filled with curiosity.

There was no robe over her legs, there was no shawl around her shoulders. Her dress wasn't black or a modest blue or a somber gray or brown. It was a brilliant scarlet, and looking more closely, Contrition saw that there was a touch of rouge on the woman's cheeks, adding a youthful look to a face that already looked much more youthful than her years.

"As you are so many years my junior, I will not apologize for not standing up to greet you," Jewel Haywood said, her voice still tart. "Age before beauty, as the saying goes. And you are a beauty! Come closer, I dislike having to shout across a room. I save my voice for shouting when it's necessary, and it often is. Take that chair. And take off your bonnet. How can I get a good look at you while you're wearing it? The wearing of bonnets during social calls is an asinine custom."

Contrition reached up and removed her bonnet, expecting a blast of disapproval for her short mop of curls. Jewel Haywood regarded her and her eyes twinkled.

"I'd like to believe that being a girl of spirit, you cut off your hair so you wouldn't have to be bothered with it. But the dictates of fashion being what they are, you were probably forced to part with it because of illness. It's outrageously becoming, child! It suits you to a T. I expect you've already gobbled up your refreshments. If you aren't a greedy young thing then something must ail you. At your age I was the greediest of them all. Fortunately, it never put an ounce on me. Still doesn't." A hand adorned with wedding ring but

no other ornaments patted her flat stomach, and her face was filled with satisfaction. "You won't either, from the look of you. Phoebe, now, doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive. She's a worry to me, my granddaughter is. Needs friends. You're the right age, but I wanted to look you over before I started pushing toward a bosom friendship between the two of you."

Well, I never! Contrition thought. Aloud, she said that yes, she had already had her tea, thank you.

A tea table was pulled close to the invalid's chair, laden not only with a silver teapot and the same delicate china that had been used in the drawing room but with iced cakes and bread and butter and preserves as well.

"So you are the newest member of Obediah Wright's flock! I wish you joy of it. One of the compensations of my crippled state is that I'm no longer obliged to sit through his insufferably dull sermons! I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to stand up and call him an ass, right in the middle of them. Well, it's too late now, the opportunity is forever lost. Never pass up an opportunity, my girl, because it may not come again, and you'll regret it all the rest of your life."

Contrition was enthralled. There was no other word for it. Jewel Haywood was a woman after Contrition's own heart. And a great flood tide of joy rose up in her, threatening to swamp her, as she realized that this marvelous old lady was her grandmother! It took every ounce of willpower that she could dredge up not to throw her arms around her and blurt out the truth.

My grandmother, she thought. My very own grandmother! Dear God, how was she ever to carry out her intention to bring her father to ruin now, and all the rest of the Haywood family with him? It would hurt this remarkable old lady as well, there was no telling how much it would hurt her.

As quickly as it had come, her flood of compassion for Jewel Haywood receded. Her grandmother was a Haywood, she had been a party to the injustice that had been done to her mother, and she deserved no more pity than the rest of them. And Jewel herself had just told her never to lose an opportunity.

Contrition's chin came up. Something told her that if Jewel had

been in her place, she wouldn't let anything stop her, especially an old lady she'd never seen before and whom she would never see again, once all of this was over.

Jewel picked up an iced cake and snapped off a sizable bite. "It's good. Mrs. Curtis is improving. Not that I didn't have a time with her until she got the recipe right! Elizabeth is an admirable housemistress, there's never a speck of dust, but when it comes to cooking, it's quantity she's interested in, not quality. She eats too much, that's why she's gone to flab."

There was something in the old lady's voice that told Contrition that there was no love lost between her grandmother and Elizabeth Haywood, and for a moment her resolution to ignore the fact that Jewel Haywood would be hurt when she brought her father to ruin wavered. Anyone who didn't like Elizabeth Haywood was a friend of hers. But Jewel was talking again, and her muddled thoughts were interrupted.

"When I was young, I ate like a farmhand, but I didn't put on any flab. I kept my body hard and fit by riding every day, rain or shine, and even in the snow if it wasn't too deep for the horses. Now I have to take it out in propelling this ridiculous chair around the room as fast as I can make it go. The exercise isn't all that much, but it's fun to see the servants cringe and hear my daughter-in-law rave that I'm going to crash into the furniture and damage it, or myself. I expect she'd rather see me damaged than the furniture because then I could be confined to my bed and not be such a trial to her."

"Grandmother!" There was embarrassed distress in Phoebe's voice, and her cheeks were flushed. "Do behave yourself, what will Miss Verndon think of us?"

"Miss Verndon, Miss Verndon! Call her Dianna, you silly child! You're both girls, almost of an age, and something tells me that you're going to be the bosom friends I envisioned. Dianna, call my granddaughter Phoebe, and that's an order!"

"Yes, ma'am. Phoebe, I am going to call you Phoebe."

Phoebe's face seemed to crumple. "Will you really? I'm so glad Dianna! Grandmother is almost always right, and it will be wonderful to have a really close friend!"

"How dare you say nearly always? I'm always right!"

Phoebe's face broke into a smile, and her eyes began to sparkle. In repose, her face was rather plain, although far from displeasing. Why, she was lovely when she smiled! All of the pale plainness disappeared, along with every trace of the haughty, pampered young lady whom Contrition had determined to despise. Her emotions so mixed that she was shaken to the core, Contrition was glad when the door burst open without so much as a knock and young David burst into the room.

"Am I too late, Granny?" David demanded, tossing his schoolbooks into a corner without even looking to see where they landed. "Good, there's plenty of cakes and bread and jelly left!"

"When did I ever eat'em all up so that you'd have to go hungry till supper?" his grandmother demanded. Her eyes, as they rested on her youngest grandchild, were filled with adoration. "You hair is a disgrace. Did you comb it with a stirring spoon?"

"Nope." David grabbed a slice of bread and smeared it with butter and jam. He started to stuff it in his mouth, and Jewel's voice, sharp this time, rang out.

"Mind your manners! Say hello to Miss Verndon before you start stuffing your face! And don't forget to bow or I'll whack your behind!"

His mouth already full, David executed a stiff, exaggerated bow. He swallowed, grinning. "Is that low enough? She'd have to be royalty for me to try to make it any lower! Hello, Miss Verndon. I'm very pleased to meet you. I saw you in church last Sunday."

There was a smear of jam at the corner of his mouth. Contrition wanted to wipe it off for him. Instead, she grinned back at him. "Lick your mouth. No, the other side."

David licked and the jam disappeared. "She's as pretty as I told you she was, isn't she, Granny? And she likes me. I wiggled my ears for her in church, and when I peeked around I saw that she liked it. She had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing."

"I never saw anyone wiggle his ears as well as you do," Contrition told him, her voice filled with admiration. "I tried to wiggle mine when I got home, but I couldn't."

"Some can and some can't. I'm lucky, I can. Only sometimes it isn't so lucky because it gets me caned at school. Mr. Breckenridge

doesn't have any sense of humor at all, the stiff old stick! But it's worth it because it makes the other fellows laugh, and it's fun to see Mr. Breckenridge's face get so red we all wait to see if it's going to explode all over the schoolroom."

David, Contrition thought, took after his grandmother. Each of them had enough spirit for two people their size.

"That's the way. If something's worth it, go ahead and do it and take your punishment," Jewel Haywood approved. "Dianna, I want you to come and visit me often. And don't try to wriggle out of it because if you do, I'll send for you, and maybe I'll whack your behind as handily as I would David's if he disobeyed me."

Looking at her, Contrition thought that the crippled old lady would probably be capable of it.

"I'll tell Betty that you come to read to me. Who knows, we might even do some reading! Are you familiar with this book, Dianna?" She held up the book she'd been reading, and Contrition's eyes bulged as she read the title. *The Canterbury Tales!* Why, that was a naughty book! Mr. Yeats had a copy and he'd let her read out of it, recommending it in spite of its raciness because of its incomparable wit. But she was an actress, and Mrs. Haywood was a respectable old lady! Contrition was flabbergasted, and her respect for Jewel raised another notch.

"Ma'am, I'd like nothing better than to read to you from that book, only I hope that Phoebe's mother doesn't catch us at it! She just might go into a tizzy and faint right here on your sitting room floor."

"Oh, my!" Phoebe's eyes were wide. "Is it really that bad?"

"Not unless you're a prissy young missy!" her grandmother told her. "All the same, it isn't for you. This young lady is a different matter entirely; she has a bit of the devil in her eyes. Something tells me that she and I are going to get along. David, get your sticky paws off my book! It isn't for you either, not until you've got at least two more years on you! Then I'll let you read it to your heart's content."

"You won't have to whack my bottom. I'll come as often as you'll have me," Contrition said.

Jewel looked at her with approval. "You'll do. Phoebe, you can let her go home now. Dianna, I want you back here the day after

tomorrow. Two o'clock will be fine. We'll talk and we'll read and we'll have tea together, and Phoebe shall join us for tea. It will be the beginning of a very special friendship between us."

Leaving the room, leaving the house with Lotta in step beside her, Contrition was afraid of that.

18

ETHEL May Creighton sat in Contrition's minuscule parlor, balancing a teacup and toying with a slice of spice cake. Her curiosity about any newcomer to Albany, and especially a newcomer to the Reverend Obediah Wright's flock, and most especially a newcomer who had not yet had the opportunity to hear all the latest gossip, had driven her to drop in on Contrition to evaluate her in private as she had not been able to evaluate her at the Tuesday Afternoon Sewing Circle. Her purpose was twofold. First, to see for herself just what sort of an establishment Miss Dianna Verndon kept, and second, to be the first to tell Miss Dianna Verndon everything there was to tell before some other lady got there before her.

Contrition's parlor wasn't really minuscule, it was minuscule only by comparison with Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood's parlor, for instance, or with Ethel May's parlor, which was smaller by only two or three feet than Elizabeth Haywood's. Contrition's entire establishment was small, hardly in keeping with the socially elite among whom Mrs. Ethel May Creighton moved, but Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was not a snob. She made a particular effort not to be a snob, simply because Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood was one. And because Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood was not bending over backward to accept Miss Dianna Verndon into Albany's most exclusive society, then Mrs. Ethel May Creighton intended to champion the

girl. Miss Dianna Verndon was certainly a lady, even though of moderate means. She spoke well, she dressed well, and she had a servant.

But by far the most important reason for Mrs. Ethel May Creighton to take Miss Verndon under her wing was that it appeared that Miss Verndon and Miss Phoebe Haywood were going to be bosom friends, inseparable as only young ladies of that age could be. Therefore, it behooved Mrs. Ethel May Creighton to get there first, to align Miss Verndon solidly on her side, so that Miss Verndon would be not only willing but eager to repay Mrs. Ethel May Creighton for her friendship by relaying any juicy tidbit about the Haywoods that she might pick up while she was visiting the Haywood mansion.

Contribution, on the other hand, had an ax of her own to grind, and she lost no time in setting it against the grindstone.

"I'm afraid that the cake isn't very good. Carlotta is an admirable maid-companion, but as a cook she is somewhat lacking." Contribution had made the cake herself, and it was perfect. "I'd be extremely grateful if you would let me have the recipe for your own spice cake, Mrs. Creighton. Phoebe has told me that you serve the best spice cake in Albany." A blatant lie, but desperate circumstances call for desperate measures, and Contribution needed to align Mrs. Ethel May Creighton solidly on her side.

Mrs. Ethel May Creighton beamed. Indeed, she allowed, her spice cake was superior, and she'd be delighted to let Contribution have the receipt, although she virtually never gave it to anyone, it having come down for generations through her family.

"And Mrs. Creighton, I fear that this is an imposition, but I really don't know where to send Carlotta to shop for our foodstuffs. I don't mind paying a fair price, but I have the feeling that we aren't getting as high a quality as we would if we knew the right places. The greens Carlotta brought home the last time were wilted, and the chops were tough."

Mrs. Ethel May Creighton beamed even more broadly. Giving advice was her second favorite pastime, the first being the passing on of gossip. And why shouldn't she give advice, as she was without any modicum of doubt the most knowledgeable lady in Albany about everything there was to know?

"Go to Mr. Blecket's shop, my dear, he's the best butcher in Albany. You'll never get a tough chop from him, I assure you! And all of his meat is fresh, and the price is moderate. Tell him that I recommended you to him and you will be sure to receive the best of service! And Mr. Bakeman's establishment is the best place to buy your greenstuff. He charges in proportion to the quality of his merchandise, but you have to pay for quality, you know, it isn't any saving to pay less and have the food under par."

"You are so right! I'm so delighted that you called, Mrs. Creighton! There are any number of things I need advice about, being new to city life."

"Come to me with any questions, at any time at all! I'll be most happy to assist you." Mrs. Ethel May Creighton took another bite of the spice cake, cocked her head to one side for all the world like a bird, and ventured the opinion that the cake was quite good, actually. "Although there isn't enough cinnamon in it, my dear. It definitely lacks cinnamon. But I'll have my Mrs. Greenway pen out my receipt for you, and I'll send it around by a boy as soon as I get home."

"You're so good!" Contrition's eyes glowed with admiration. "I can't express how fortunate I feel that you should be so thoughtful and kind to me, a stranger in your midst. It means more than I could ever say."

"It's the duty of any Christian lady to guide a younger woman." Mrs. Ethel May's voice and face were smug, her wrinkles set in line of self-satisfaction. She finished the last bite of her cake and graciously accepted a second. "This tea, for instance. It's very good, very aromatic, but my brand is better even than Mrs. Haywood's, if I do say so myself. You buy it at Peterson's, my dear. Tell Mr. Peterson that you desire the same mix that he makes up for me himself."

Contrition gave every appearance of being on the verge of swooning over this magnanimity. "Your own blend! Oh, Mrs. Creighton, how can I thank you?"

"You're more than welcome, my dear. More than welcome!" Mrs. Ethel May Creighton leaned forward in her chair, her expres-

sion avid. "Miss Verndon, have you met Mr. Myron Coverdale yet?"

Contrition looked suitably puzzled. "No, I haven't. Is he someone I should know?"

"Mr. Coverdale and Miss Haywood are understood to be on the verge of announcing their betrothal. Their marriage has been a settled thing ever since Miss Haywood was a little girl. You'll be sure to be introduced to him soon, Miss Verndon."

Her eyes glittered, her face fairly quivered. She was so eager to impart her information that she was unaware that there was a crumb on her chin. The crumb trembled there, and Contrition had to avert her eyes in order not to watch it with fascination, wondering when it would drop. If Justin were here, they would make a bet on it. Making bets on such silly and trivial matters had been one of their chief sources of amusement.

"Now, you understand that I would never bandy gossip, Miss Verndon. No lady does, as you are perfectly aware. But in this case, a word to the wise is called for. You are young and attractive, and Mr. Myron Coverdale, I am afraid, is something of a philanderer. There is a possibility that he might attempt to take advantage of your youth and inexperience, and you should be on your guard. It grieves me to think how his carryings on would hurt dear Miss Haywood if any word of them ever got back to her ears! You mustn't give Mr. Coverdale any encouragement, especially as you and Miss Haywood are so fond of each other. There have been affairs that . . ." Mrs. Ethel May Creighton broke off, casting her eyes downward. "Well, I can't discuss such things with so young an unmarried lady, but I felt that I must warn you to be alert to any signs that Mr. Coverdale might take an unwarranted interest in you."

"I had no idea that Miss Haywood is about to be betrothed!" Contrition exclaimed, suitably impressed because Mrs. Ethel May Creighton had been so kind as to not only apprise her of it, but to warn her of possible complications. "I'm so glad that you told me, especially about Mr. Coverdale. I shall most certainly tread warily where he is concerned, Mrs. Creighton. Your observation about my inexperience is quite correct. I might have found myself in a most distressing situation but for your warning."

"You might, indeed. How the Haywoods can affiance their only

daughter to a gentleman of Mr. Coverdale's reputation is beyond my understanding! Mr. Haywood, both Mr. Haywoods, for that matter, surely know of Mr. Coverdale's unsavory reputation. It's the money, of course, and the prestige. The Coverdales are one of the oldest families in Albany, and an alliance with them will be beneficial to the elder Mr. Haywood, and to Miss Haywood's father, as well. Miss Haywood's father has political ambitions, you know, and the Coverdales' backing will mean a great deal to him. All the same, I think it's wicked! Miss Haywood is a sweet, innocent child, and she's bound to be an unhappy wife if the Haywoods' plan to marry her to Mr. Coverdale is carried out."

"Oh, dear, how dreadful!" Contrition exclaimed. "How very dreadful!"

"Perhaps, as you and Miss Haywood are such friends, you could hint to her, merely hint but in a manner she could not fail to comprehend, that she should show a little resistance to the notion of marrying Mr. Coverdale. Perhaps if a hint were dropped, her eyes would be opened and she would decide for herself that she would not become Mr. Coverdale's wife. She could at least insist that the wedding be postponed for two or three years, as she is so young, and perhaps by that time Mr. Coverdale will have changed his ways, or she will be more mature and better able to cope with his goings on."

You don't give a hang about Phoebe, you scrawny old crow! Contrition wanted to yelp. You only want to prevent Phoebe from marrying Mr. Coverdale because it's what the Haywoods want!

"Mrs. Creighton, your cup is empty! Oh, dear, I'm afraid I'm a poor excuse for a hostess. But you will instruct me, will you not? You'll know every nicety, and I am sadly in need of instruction!"

"One more cup, if you please, my dear. I never take more than three. And the teapot has gone a little cold. You should instruct your maid to freshen it in a case like this. Always make sure that she has the kettle on the boil when you have guests, so that the teapot can be freshened."

"There! I didn't know that at all!" Contrition cried, her eyes filled with the moisture of pure gratitude. "How kind you are to tell me, and without taking offence that I offered you tepid tea! Oh, dear,

I have no little bell. Should I have a little bell to summon Carlotta, Mrs. Creighton, or would it be acceptable for me to leave the room to tell her to freshen the tea?"'

"In this case, I will excuse you while you tell her, but I would recommend that you purchase a bell. You can find one at Morton's, it's only a step from Peterson's where you will be purchasing your tea."

Mrs. Ethel May Creighton took her leave at last, but not until the spice cake that Contrition had thought would last her and Lotta for several days had been demolished. How a woman that scrawny could eat so much was more than Contrition could fathom. She expected that Mrs. Ethel May Creighton needed a great deal of fuel to give her the energy to pass on all that gossip.

Well, she'd just have to bake another cake in case some other lady came to call. Mrs. Ethel May Creighton had been so eager to inspect her house that she had neglected to merely leave a calling card and then wait for an invitation. It was unlikely that any other lady would act so unconventionally, but it wouldn't do not to be prepared in case they did.

"If that old crow hadn't left, I wouldn't have been able to hold myself back another second. I'd have said something dreadful to her! I felt like telling her to wash out her mouth with soap!" she exclaimed to Lotta, whose head poked into the hall to make sure that the guest was gone.

"I know. I was listening with my ear to the door," Lotta confessed with no shame whatsoever. "I almost wished that you'd spill that 'freshened' tea all over her when you poured her her third cup! And she played havoc with the sugar bowl, too, and sugar is dear!"

"It's a good thing that I'm an actress. She dotes on me, Lotta! The horrid old cat dotes on me! And now I'm positive that she hates the Haywoods, and that's going to make bringing my father to ruin a whole lot easier!" Contrition grabbed Lotta round her waist and danced around the entrance hall with her. "Lotta, we're doing it! We're almost there!"

Her hands dropped from Lotta's waist and her face fell, her eyes clouding. "I wonder if there's any truth at all about what she said

about Mr. Myron Coverdale? If there is, I feel sorry for Phoebe! Poor Phoebe, she'd never be able to cope with a philandering husband. Her heart would be broken and she'd be miserable!"

Lotta had the good sense not to say that she thought that Contrition had wanted Phoebe to be miserable right along with the rest of the Haywoods. Things were more complicated than they'd counted on. Evangeline would be sure to say "I told you so!" if she were here. Lotta, who wanted only the best for everyone, had a sinking feeling that someone was going to be hurt, and she didn't want it to be either Contrition or Phoebe. She wished again, as she so often wished, that she weren't an actress, so that she could pray that nobody would be hurt except the ones who deserved to be.

Maybe she shouldn't even wish that the ones who deserved to be hurt should be hurt. She might be an actress, but she read her Bible every night, and the Bible said, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." And if the Bible said it, it had to be true, and if Contrition exacted vengeance, the Lord wasn't going to like it and maybe Contrition would never be able to be saved, even if she stopped being an actress. It was all very confusing.

Lotta wasn't the only one who was disturbed because everything was so confusing. Contrition hadn't given up one iota of her resolution to bring her father to ruin, but on the other hand, she liked Phoebe, that little brown mouse of her one half of a sister who wouldn't know how to protect herself from a cat. Phoebe, from what Contrition had seen of her, would let the cat corner her and just stand there waiting to be eaten, instead of scurrying up the nearest wall or under the nearest crack to get away.

There was Mrs. Elizabeth Haywood, a woman nearly as horrible and disagreeable as Mrs. Ethel May Creighton. She deserved to be punished, if not because she'd been a party to the injustice done Contrition's mother, then on general principles, because she was haughty and overbearing and thought that she was better than anyone else, and she kept Phoebe so under her thumb that Phoebe didn't dare to breathe without her permission.

On the other hand, there was Jewel, and Contrition couldn't find any pleasure at all in contemplating Jewel's punishment, even if she

hadn't stopped her husband from forcing Lelia to marry Amos Reeves.

And then there was David, and Contrition didn't want him hurt at all. David was her one half of a brother just as much as Phoebe was her one half of a sister, and David was a scamp, and given half a chance Contrition could adore him without half-trying. David had spunk, and a sense of humor, and a lot of backbone. Contrition only wished that he could spare a little of his backbone for Phoebe. Walter, her other one half of a brother, was still an unknown quantity. Contrition half-hoped that when she met him, he'd turn out to be as horrible as his mother and his father and his grandfather, so that she wouldn't have to worry about him either.

Lotta's face was filled with consternation, and her eyes were filled with tears. "Dianna, couldn't you just forget the whole thing? We could go back to the troupe and not raise a finger against the Haywoods and leave them to the Lord to punish in his own good time. You should at least pray about it. You haven't been an actress for as long as I have, so maybe it's all right for you to pray because you aren't as much of a sinner."

Contrition burst into laughter; she couldn't help it even when Lotta looked mortally hurt. "You goose! You silly goose! You're as much of a sinner as a newborn babe! I'm the sinner because I'm scheming and plotting to hurt my father. If I'm going to do any praying, it'll be that I can hurt him as much as he hurt my mother and a little bit over, for interest. Now don't go crying! If it's going to upset you that much, then I won't call attention to what I'm going to do by praying! Then if it's a sin, maybe it'll be overlooked."

At services on Sunday morning, Mrs. Ethel May Creighton greeted Contrition as though she were her long lost daughter. "Dear Miss Verndon! What a pleasure it is to see you here, and in such apparent fine health!" Mrs. Ethel May Creighton did not include Lotta in her greeting. She was not, as she was so fond of telling anyone who would listen, a snob, she simply did not notice any person as lowly as a maid-companion.

In a lower, conspiratorial voice, she whispered, "He's here. Mr. Myron Coverdale. If Miss Haywood doesn't introduce you after the

service, I'll find the opportunity to do it myself. Just be sure that you remember what I told you."

"I'll remember," Contrition whispered back, her voice fully as conspiratorial. As a matter of fact, as much as she wanted to tell Mrs. Ethel May Creighton to mind her own business, she was curious about Mr. Coverdale and eager to form her own opinion. She couldn't tell a thing about him now, because she and Lotta took their places in the back of the church as they had the week before, and Myron Coverdale, along with a group of people whom Contrition surmised were also Coverdales, sat well to the front, so that all she could see was a pair of impeccably tailored shoulders and black hair curling over his collar. Her glance roved on to Phoebe, who with her father and mother and grandfather and a wriggling David sat even further toward the front. She couldn't help but compare how vulnerably frail Phoebe's shoulders were compared to those of Myron Coverdale.

Don't let that despicable woman's opinion influence you, she told herself. Wait and make up your own mind about him. Anything that Mrs. Ethel May Creighton said was bound to be filled with malice, and just as likely there wasn't a word of truth in it.

"Let us bow our heads in prayer," the Reverend Mr. Obediah Wright intoned. Lotta bowed her head and wished that she dared to pray, but she thought that she was probably lucky that the church roof didn't fall in on the congregation just because she was here at all, and she'd better not push her luck. Contrition bowed her head but she couldn't resist peeking to see what that scamp David was doing. To David's credit, he didn't wiggle his ears until the Reverend Mr. Obediah Wright said a resounding "Amen." The perfection of the wiggling made up for the wait. Belatedly, Contrition did her praying while a Bible reading took place, even if she had promised Lotta that she wouldn't.

She asked herself, rather woefully, how she could bring her father to ruin without hurting a little boy whose greatest sin was wiggling his ears in church, and a little brown mouse who was afraid of her own shadow.

The sermon was as long as it had been last week. Contrition tried to pay strict attention to it because she knew that she didn't know

everything in the world and she might learn something. But her own thoughts, and particularly her curiosity about Mr. Myron Coverdale, kept getting in the way. If her one half of a sister was going to marry someone, Contrition wanted to know all about him.

She was gratified when, as she and Lotta stood outside the church while Contrition made herself sweetly agreeable to everyone and Lotta made herself inconspicuous as befitted a maid-companion, Phoebe smiled at her and put her hand on Mr. Myron Coverdale's arm and drew him toward them.

"Miss Verndon, may I present Mr. Myron Coverdale?" Phoebe asked.

Contrition bowed her head in modest greeting. Mr. Coverdale bowed his head in acknowledgement. Landamercy, but he was a handsome one! Behind the footlights, he'd have every lady's heart thumping with unrequited love before the first act was over! His eyes were a dark hazel, his brows finely defined, his jaw was firm and manly. A noble countenance indeed, Contrition thought, and she couldn't help thinking how jealous Gavin would be if Mr. Coverdale were to join the troupe to outshine him.

All the same, she didn't like him. His scrutiny of her was a thinly veiled appraisal, and to her chagrin he dismissed her as of being of no interest to him. She'd swear that his eyes had rested on her bodice, seeing right through her dress to what lay underneath, and found her lacking!

Phoebe was speaking again, in spite of the fact that Elizabeth Haywood looked like a thundercloud. "And this is Miss Carlotta Horton, Miss Verndon's companion," Phoebe said. She didn't add that Lotta was also Miss Verndon's maid, and Contrition felt a burst of warmth toward her.

Mr. Myron Coverdale's eyes registered interest. There wasn't any doubt in the world that Lotta was better endowed with womanly endowments than was Contrition. Even in her modest gray dress, which was frumpy enough for a maid-companion and which she had made especially for this role because her usual wardrobe was smart in the extreme owing to the magic of her needle, her charms were evident. Contrition had seen gentlemen look at both Evangeline and

Lotta like that too many times not to know what Mr. Myron Coverdale was thinking.

Evangeline always enjoyed such an evaluation, secure in her ability to take care of herself. In Lotta's case, the gentlemen had Dolly to contend with, a protecting dragon who didn't let them get near her. Contrition had had no problem at all as she had always played the part of a boy, and judging from Mr. Myron Coverdale's dismissal of her just now, she wouldn't have had any problem if she'd played girls' parts. No wonder Mr. Henry Davenport hadn't been interested in her! She might have consoled herself with the thought that Justin had fallen in love with her, but she had a very good suspicion that that had only been because of the expert way with which she could handle Zeus.

As much as she hated to admit it, she had a sneaking suspicion that Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was right. Mr. Myron Coverdale was a philanderer, and Phoebe was a little brown mouse, and it was a mismatch if Contrition had ever heard of one. Phoebe's life would be miserable if she married the handsome lady-killer. Not only handsome and a lady-killer, Contrition thought; there was a coldness in his eyes that boded ill for any soft, sweet young thing who would seek warmth and understanding from her husband. Cold and hard and ruthless, undoubtedly a man after old John Haywood's heart, but it was Phoebe's heart and the state of it that concerned Contrition, and Contrition didn't like it one little bit.

Lotta had sensed it, too. "Did you see the way Mr. Coverdale looked at me? Dolly would be standing between me and a man like that, just in case I was stupid enough to take him at face value!" Lotta said as they were walking home. "Brrr! I don't like him, Dianna. I wonder what Miss Phoebe sees in him!"

"Phoebe hasn't had much experience with men, I'll be bound. She's been protected to the point of being smothered. It isn't what she sees in him, but what her mother and her father and her grandfather see in him. She'll be poor Phoebe, all right, if she marries him!"

"He is awfully handsome, though," Lotta said, almost wistfully. "And rich, too."

"Would you marry him if you had the chance?" Contrition challenged her.

Lotta shuddered. "Not I! But then I'd never have the chance. Men like Mr. Coverdale don't marry actresses, they have affairs with them. No wonder so many people think that we're the worst sinners in the world!"

"Lotta, you aren't a sinner! I wish you'd stop saying that!"

"I'm an actress so it's just the same, even if I never actually did anything dreadful." Lotta's face was doleful. Contrition felt like shaking her, but she couldn't on a public street on a Sunday morning, where other worshipers walking home would see it. It wouldn't do any good, anyway.

"Well, you aren't an actress now, you're a maid-companion," was the best she could do. "And you go to church every Sunday and sew for the orphans, and so even if you were a sinner, which you aren't, you'd already be well on the way to salvation."

Lotta didn't look the least bit convinced. "But I'll go back to being an actress after you've brought your father to ruin because there isn't anything else I can do. Nobody will hire me as a househussy because I'm too pretty, and I wasn't strong enough to work in a cotton mill, and I'm not smart enough to earn my living any other way."

"Well, you don't have to fret about it now! You don't have to worry about it till you're dying, and you aren't going to die for another fifty years, at least! You can get yourself saved when the time comes, and in the meantime you might as well enjoy yourself all you can!"

"Oh, Dianna, that's sinful!" Lotta said, shocked almost out of her shoes. But she couldn't help laughing, and she couldn't help hoping that there was a little truth in what Dianna said. Maybe both of them could get themselves saved after they weren't actresses any more, and then Dianna would get to go to heaven, too, if she were sorry enough about having brought her father to ruin instead of waiting for the Lord to punish him, and that would be a whole lot nicer than having to go without her. It would hardly seem like heaven if Dianna weren't there.

On the following Monday afternoon, Contrition went to visit

Jewel Haywood. Her grandmother—Contrition was still filled with mixed emotions, her pleasure in having discovered a grandmother diluted because she wasn't sure yet whether or not Jewel deserved to be loved as a grandmother—insisted that Contrition visit her at least three times a week.

Confined to her upstairs quarters, Jewel Haywood was bored and avid for a new face and conversation with a bright young lady whose brain she hadn't already picked clean. Contrition was bright and cheerful; having her come into the room was like a breath of fresh air.

And besides, Contrition could read to her, saving her eyes from strain. The things they read would have sent Betty Haywood into a tizzy fit. Chaucer, the *Decameron* and *Tristam Shandy*. But Contrition wasn't shocked at all. She laughed so hard that tears came into her eyes at the different and comical aspects of human behavior that were brought so vividly to life between the covers of those tomes. It wasn't any wonder that Jewel had never asked Phoebe to read to her from these books, though. Phoebe would have swooned.

But on this Monday afternoon, after Jewel had sent Phoebe about her business as she always managed to do when they were going to read things not fit for Phoebe's shell-pink ears, Jewel fixed Contrition with her sharp eyes.

"I hear that you were introduced to Myron Coverdale yesterday," Jewel said. "What do you think of him? No, don't stop to think about it, blurt it out!"

"He's a skunk," Contrition said.

"Exactly. My opinion of your intelligence wasn't wrong, Dianna. Unfortunately, he's a skunk intent on marrying my granddaughter, and my husband and my daughter-in-law are just as intent on bringing about the match. And here I am, confined to this room in this abominable invalid's chair, unable to lift a hand to stop it!"

"Couldn't you talk Phoebe out of it?" Contrition asked. "She's terribly fond of you; you must have some influence over her."

"Don't think I haven't tried! But I'm only one old woman without a modicum of power in this house. My husband is the supreme authority, and if I use too many arguments against the match, he decrees that my granddaughter shall not visit me until I have mended

my ways and make no more attempts to upset the applecart. As the head of the household, his word is law, and there isn't a thing I can do about it. Sometimes I think that I should have shot the man when I was young and capable of it!"

At the look on Contrition's face, Jewel laughed, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Come now! You're no Miss Priss, to be shocked at such a statement! I'll warrant you that at least a quarter of the married women in the world wish they had the courage and the opportunity to do away with their husbands at one time or another! Certainly I wish sometimes that I'd killed that man, and I'll tell you right out that I came very near to it the day I had my accident.

"The trouble was I knew I couldn't get away with it. Everybody knew how we fought, they all knew how I opposed him at every turn. I'd have hanged higher than a kite, and I had my three children to think of. What would their lives have been like if their mother had been hanged for murder, the murder of their father?

"So I took it out in going for a mad gallop instead, trying to ride the worst of my anger away until I could face that man again without actually getting his pistol and blasting a hole right between his eyes! And I came a cropper; I set my horse at a stone fence, and I was so blind with anger that I didn't see that it was too high for him, and when he shied at the jump and balked I went off, and here I am."

Jewel paused to draw a deep breath. "I was even angrier at my husband for selling my horse without my knowing, when I was flat on my back all trussed up in splints and bandages and nobody knowing whether I was going to live or die. If he'd shot the horse in blind fury because it had thrown me, I'd have been furious, but what he did was even worse. He sold it for a profit! A good, handsome profit, dickering and dealing until he got the best possible price for it! But that's John Haywood. Everything has to turn a profit, even a disaster for his wife!"

Contrition found her voice which had seemed to be stuck somewhere in her throat. "Do you really hate him so much?"

Jewel snorted. Jewel often snorted to show any variety of emotions.

"What do you think? Once I was helpless, confined to this invalid's chair, I had to watch him keep my children from me

whenever I said anything that displeased him, I had to watch him mold Gerald, my youngest child and only son, in his own image, insofar as he could, which I thank God wasn't all that far because Gerald hasn't the coldness in him, the ruthlessness, that John has. Gerald simply takes the easiest way and that's going along with whatever's wanted or expected of him.

"I had to watch while John arranged loveless marriages for both of my daughters, advantageous marriages I'll grant you, but loveless for all that. And although they've been as contented as most women who've had the same thing done to them, still they were cheated because without love, what is there? And now I have to sit here, helpless for all my fuming, and watch the same thing happen to my granddaughter, only worse. Myron Coverdale will make Phoebe miserable, she'll never know a moment's happiness, and I know it, and it drives me insane because there isn't a thing I can do about it."

"I wish there were some way I could help." The words came impulsively.

"It could have been so different!" Jewel said, her eyes blazing. "There was a young man Phoebe was taken with, a fine, kind young man who would have cherished her and made her happy. But as soon as John and Betty saw that Phoebe was interested in him, they saw to it that she was never allowed to attend any function where he would be, and he was never included in invitations to this house. John and Betty chose Myron Coverdale for her instead because the Coverdales back John in his ambition to see Gerald in the governor's chair of New York State. They'll back him all the way, and their power and wealth will be a deciding factor when the time comes."

Contrition was mesmerized. To think that her father aspired to the governorship! When she brought him to ruin, it would hurt him worse than she had dared hope for. It was a certainty that no man with a known bastard daughter could ever be elected to the governorship!

"Mrs. Haywood, you're so strong, you have such a mind of your own, how on earth did you ever come to marry John Haywood?" she asked. It was an impertinent question, but somehow she didn't feel the least compunction about asking it. There must be some truth in the old saw that blood calls to blood, she thought, because she

was drawn to Jewel and Jewel was drawn to her, even though Jewel had no inkling that Contrition was her granddaughter.

"I was young," Jewel told her wryly. "I was only eighteen. You needn't look at me like that, young lady! There was a time when I was eighteen, just as you are today. And I had the misfortune to have a father who had a great deal of money and no social position, who had had to make his own way in the world. Which my father proceeded to do with all speed, having a finger not only in the construction of public buildings in New York City, but also in mercantiling and shipping.

"I was the youngest of my father's children. My two older sisters and one of my older brothers were already married. They were good enough marriages, but no special prestige was connected with them. My father wanted better for me, his youngest and his pet. When John Haywood came to New York City to seek backing for one of the Haywood enterprises, he came to my father after he'd been turned down in other places. The Haywoods had all the prestige in the world, but at that time very little money. John's father had invested unwisely, and the Haywoods were in financial straits.

"I thought, being young, that it was all very exciting and romantic. John was not a stupid man. He saw his opportunity to bring money into his family by marrying me, and he knew that he would have to court me with every appearance of being madly in love with me or I wouldn't have him, nor would my father have insisted that I have him against my will. So he turned on his charm, and he deceived both my father and me into thinking that he would make a most admirable husband for me. Little Jewel O'Brian was going to be a somebody, she was going to take her place as one of the leading lights of New York State society!

"And so we were married. My father backed John's enterprise, and John, being not at all like his father, made it prosper. My father backed other of his enterprises and all of them prospered.

"But if our family fortune prospered, our marriage did not. Oh, I was happy enough in the early years! All of my father's ambitions for me were realized. I was Albany's leading hostess. I had three children, one right after the other. John wanted a large family, he

had dreams of a family dynasty, and I was only too happy to oblige him.

"My idyll came to an end when I learned that John had betrayed my father's trust. During those first years, John had borrowed increasingly large sums from my father to invest in his own ventures. Some interest was paid on the loans but never the full amount. And the loans, or investments, whichever you prefer to call them, were not repaid, but the profits plowed back into still more ventures, always with the promise of much larger gains.

"My father overextended himself in his efforts to ensure that John would be a rich man. When he found himself in financial difficulties, he asked John to repay part of what was due him. But John had protected himself well, using devious legal terms in the agreements. It was all very complicated, but my father had no recourse. His health failed, and he died virtually impoverished. The estate that was to have been divided equally among all of his children was in John's hands, and my sisters and brothers got nothing.

"It was a matter of business, John told me, when I faced him with it and demanded that he turn over their share to the others in my family. He had the temerity to tell me that I should be happy that he had had the intelligence to arrange things so that our own fortunes would soar.

"We quarreled. It was the bitterest quarrel we had ever had. That was the day when I left the house and set off on my mad gallop, in order to prevent myself from killing my husband.

"John never forgave me for the injuries that prevented me giving him any more children. He wanted more sons to carry on his empire. Therefore he turned his efforts even more strongly to molding Gerald in his own image. When I tried to use my influence with my son against it, Gerald was kept from my company. Gerald loved me, he still loves me. I have that to be thankful for. And one other thing, that he never turned into the utterly ruthless man his father wanted him to be. He's only weak, too anxious to do as others want. He follows along with his father's plans, and Elizabeth's, because it's easier than resisting them."

"Even to marrying Elizabeth? Didn't he put up any fight against that?" Contrition couldn't contain herself. She had to know, and this

opportunity might never come again, a day when Jewel was so upset that she talked freely. "He's so terribly handsome, surely he could have had his pick of any girl in Albany."

"He did have his eye on another girl. A connection of Ethel May Creighton's, as a matter of fact. She was a sweet little thing, nothing at all like Ethel May, but then she was only a cousin.

"But although Gerald isn't as coldly calculating as his father, he has a large bump of conceit. It wasn't hard for John to make him picture himself as governor, and Elizabeth's family has a great deal more wealth and influence than the Creightons. And in those days Betty wasn't unattractive. She had fair hair and a fresh complexion, even though she wasn't a beauty, and she gave no indication then that she would let her figure go once she'd had children. She also had that charm that comes from supreme self-confidence, something that only money and breeding can produce. She was the better match, and Gerald settled for her.

"I tried to warn Gerald against her. Being a woman, I could see what another woman would become. The haughtiness, the arrogance that was bound to grow as she grew older, the lack of real human warmth. Elizabeth's ambitions matched my husband's, she considered that being the governor's wife was no more than her due, and she and John work hand in glove toward that goal.

"Gerald has paid for his folly, I can tell you that. Fool that he was for listening to his father instead of to me, I still can't help feeling sorry for him. Betty has none of the warmth and understanding that a man needs in his wife, only her ambition. Because of John, none of my children have found the happiness they should have found in marriage.

"And now there's Phoebe. John and her mother between them have managed to bully every semblance of backbone out of her. She loves her father, but she's terrified of her mother and her grandfather. I've done what I could to try to instill some independence in her, but as he's always done, if I seemed to be having a modicum of success, John manages to keep the child away from me. It would be a different story if you were my granddaughter instead of Phoebe, wouldn't it? I can't see you standing still for being told that you

must marry someone who would be sure to make your life a misery!"

"I'd like to see anybody try!" Contrition said, her eyes sparkling fire.

"There! You have backbone, you have enough to share some of it with Phoebe! Talk to her, gain her confidence, persuade her to say no! Use every wile you can dredge up to talk her out of it, there's my good girl. Phoebe's taken with you. She's never had a real friend; Betty and John have intimidated every girl of her own age who has tried to become her friend. But you won't be intimidated, I can see that. Be the friend she needs, and maybe between the two of us we'll be able to drum enough courage into her to dig in her heels and refuse to marry Myron Coverdale."

"I'll try," Contrition said. This was something she could get her teeth into, and the idea of a battle between herself and John and Betty Haywood filled her with excitement. "You can believe that I'll do my best!"

"I knew I wouldn't have to ask you twice. All right, that's enough. Read to me for fifteen minutes, and then go and corner my granddaughter and start working on her!"

"Her mother doesn't seem exactly enthusiastic about throwing Phoebe in my company. I'm not nearly grand enough."

"If it weren't understood that you're only going to be in Albany for the winter, you probably wouldn't be allowed near her at all! But as long as your stay is going to be so brief, Betty and John tolerate you if only because you distract Phoebe from brooding about her coming betrothal. But tread warily around Betty and don't give the least hint that you're against the marriage or you'll never get near Phoebe again."

"I'm a pretty good actress; I think I'll be able to handle it," Contrition said, wondering what her grandmother would say if she had any inkling of the truth, that she was not only a pretty good actress but a professional one at that! When she brought her father to ruin, it was going to be a mixed victory, that was as plain as the nose on her face. Maybe Gerald Haywood was only weak-willed rather than vicious, but he'd still thrust Lelia into a hell on earth, and he

was going to pay for it in full, down to the last gram. But it would hurt Jewel, and it would hurt Phoebe.

Her thoughts were jerked back to the present when Jewel said, "You'll be invited to Phoebe's betrothal party. She'll want you, and I'll add every ounce of my own persuasion that you should be on the invitation list. You'll get a look at the young man Phoebe fancied before my husband put a stop to it. I want you to take a good look at him and tell me what you think. If we're going to stop this marriage, and we're going to stop it if it kills me in the doing, we ought to carry it out to its best conclusion by seeing that Phoebe marries whom she wants to marry. You'll see the two of them together, you'll know whether Phoebe still has any feeling for him. How do you like being a conspirator, with only an old woman, crippled at that, for an ally? Do you think it's going to be too much for you?"

"Not with you on my side, I don't!" Contrition said. "Between the two of us, John Haywood and Elizabeth Haywood had better watch out!"

"I see you've left out my son," Jewel said, her voice wryly mocking. "That proves that you're as intelligent as I took you to be the first time I saw you. Gerald's my son and I love him, but if he ever became governor of New York State, it would be a tragedy! He's honest enough himself, but he'd be no match against his father's machinations; my husband would manipulate Gerald to use his office for John's personal gain. Stopping this marriage will not only be a blessing for Phoebe, but for the entire state of New York!"

"Then we'll stop it," Contrition said decisively. She held out her hand, and Jewel's was surprisingly strong as she returned the pressure that sealed their pact.

"To conspirators, as long as their conspiring is for the good!" Jewel said. "Now go sic Phoebe, and begin putting some backbone in her!"

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"He's very handsome," Phoebe said. "Don't you think he's handsome, Dianna? He's quite the most handsome man, outside of Papa, in all of Albany. And his family is prominent; it's altogether a most desirable match. I consider myself a fortunate young lady."

She was parroting her mother and her grandfather word for word, and Contrition knew it and felt like shaking her.

"That all depends on whether or not you love him. For myself, I'd never marry a man I didn't love, no matter how wealthy and prominent he was. I'd rather marry some poor farmer and spend the rest of my life hoeing corn and churning butter, so long as I loved him!"

"Love comes after you are married, Mama says. Mama says that when a girl reaches a marriageable age, she is still too young to choose for herself, lacking in experience as she is, and she might choose disastrously if she were left to her own devices. And sometimes romantic love only lasts for a little while, but marriage lasts forever, and so it's doubly important that a girl should marry the right man."

"I don't believe that you love him at all!" Contrition accused her. The two girls were walking, the autumn breeze bringing roses to their cheeks, and Contrition, at least, enjoyed crunching the fallen leaves under her feet and kicking at them, reveling in the heady odor that her footsteps stirred up. "And I do believe that love is more important than wealth or prestige and position! Didn't you ever love anyone, Phoebe? Even a girlish crush?"

The red in Phoebe's cheeks wasn't all from the cold because the color deepened at Contrition's question. "Well, of course,

every young girl has crushes! But they don't mean anything; they're childish and immature and it's fortunate that they lead to nothing."

"What was he like?" Contrition probed. "This young man you had a crush on that came to nothing?"

"Nothing much. He was just sort of average. Average height and average build and average looks, I expect. His family is acceptable, they're actually quite wealthy and prominent, but he's a younger son, and moreover, he's lacking in ambition, Mama says, and Grandfather, as well. Not that they ever knew how much I liked him. Nobody knew that because he didn't even notice me, and it's just as well that he didn't because now I'm to become betrothed to Mr. Coverdale. I'm so glad that you're coming to my betrothal ball, Dianna! Having you there will mean so much to me! It's almost impossible to believe that we've known each other for such a short time; it's as though we'd known each other all our lives. Don't you feel it too, that we've known each other always?"

Contrition was exasperated. All of her attempts had ended up in this same way, with Phoebe pointing out that nearly every girl is guided in her choice of a husband by her parents, and that that was probably the way it ought to be.

She felt like shaking Phoebe till her teeth rattled. If only Phoebe loved Myron Coverdale, if only Myron Coverdale were somebody who would make her happy, it would make all the difference. If Phoebe were to be happily married to a man she loved and who would love and protect her, then she wouldn't be as hurt as she was bound to be when Contrition shattered her illusions about her father and brought him to the disgrace that he so richly deserved. The Haywoods would be ashamed to show their faces in public, their name would be ruined, and it would rub off on every member of the family, even the grandchildren.

Contrition had a very good idea that Jewel would be able to stand up under it, and David was young and tough and resilient and he'd get over it, but Phoebe was soft and vulnerable and if she were already married to a man who had no love for her but who had only married her to further his own ambitions, her life would

be plunged into a hell comparable to that of Contrition's mother's, even though Myron wouldn't abuse her physically. There were other ways of abusing someone who couldn't protect herself, and Contrition had no doubt that Phoebe would be forced to pay for her father's sins in the fullest measure when Myron Coverdale's ambitions and his name were caught up in the scandal that would rock the whole of Albany.

"This young man you had a crush on," Contrition prodded. "Are you sure you don't still like him? Maybe you even love him!"

"Of course I don't love him!" Phoebe's voice was brave but her face was miserable. "I told you that he didn't even notice me. He hardly knows I exist; he never thinks of me at all."

"You'd better make really sure of that before you go getting yourself engaged to another man! If I had even a flickering of an idea that I might love someone, then nobody or nothing in the world could make me marry someone else! I'd go after the one I wanted, and I'd get him, too!"

Hypocrite! Contrition mocked herself. What about Henry Davenport? You didn't do so well going after him, did you? You let him get away and you didn't even put up a fight!

But that was different. Henry just plain didn't like her, and he never would, and in a case like that there wasn't anything a girl could do. At least she'd had the gumption not to fall into the arms of the first other man who came along!

Hypocrite again! She'd fallen into Justin's arms, if she were going to be truthful about it, and she'd come uncomfortably close to agreeing to marry him just because her pride was lacerated, just to show Henry Davenport that somebody wanted her. She'd only backed out at the last moment. And something might still come of it when all this was over, if Justin still wanted her after she'd branded herself, in public, as a bastard as well as an actress. She could learn to love him, once she got Henry out of her blood.

"Dianna, will you come early, the evening of the ball? I'll be so nervous I'll be beside myself! Come at least an hour early, please do, and come right up to my room. Having you with me will make me feel more confident. I'm not very good at parties. All those

people, all of them so much smarter than I am, all of them so sure of themselves! I wish there didn't have to be a ball at all; I'd much rather have just a quiet wedding with no parties or balls beforehand."

What a crazy world it is, Contrition thought, more exasperated than ever. Phoebe has it all, she has everything, family, position, wealth, but she is too shy and timid to enjoy it. And Contrition hadn't ever had anything, and if she were in Phoebe's shoes, how she'd enjoy having everything that Phoebe had! And she wouldn't marry Myron Coverdale, either. She'd marry the young man she loved and spit in her mother's and her grandfather's eye before she'd let them stop her!

But there was no way she could stop this betrothal ball from taking place. After tomorrow evening, Phoebe's engagement would be an accomplished fact, and that would make Contrition's and Jewel's task all the harder. Engagements were almost impossible to break, and in the case of this particular engagement, with both families being so wealthy and prominent, it might prove to be impossible indeed.

All the same, Contrition would get a look at the young man Phoebe had had a crush on, and she'd be able to make up her mind whether or not he was worthy of her one half of a sister. If he was, then she and Jewel would fight all the harder to break the engagement. If he wasn't, then they'd find a way to break the engagement anyway, and they'd trust to luck that someday Phoebe would find someone who would make her happy.

One thing was certain. After the Haywoods' name and reputation had been ruined, any young man who asked for Phoebe's hand would do it because he loved her. That, at least, was a clear gain.

Lotta had sewed her fingers raw making the dress Contrition was to wear to the ball. The material, a blue velvet that she hadn't been able to resist because it exactly matched her eyes, had cost so much that Contrition had nearly fainted.

Not only that, but Lotta had used every iota of her designing genius to create a masterpiece. The neckline was off-the-shoulder, showing Contrition's creamy, flawless throat and shoulders. A deep flounce of the same material set off the neckline, with short, puffed

sleeves caught up with black velvet bows showing off the roundness of her arms, and a narrow, black velvet ribbon was run through eyelets at the top of the flounce.

The waistline nipped her waist, the skirt was round and full, with two deep flounces, each run through with more narrow, black velvet ribbon, and the top flounce caught up at the sides with black velvet bows. Black kid slippers completed her costume, so delicate that Contrition held that it was a waste of money to buy them because they wouldn't last for five miles of walking on a country road.

"It's a shame that you haven't a necklace and earrings to set it off," Lotta mourned. "All the same, nobody's going to have a more beautiful gown. And you'll be the most beautiful lady there; you'll be the belle of the ball! Do watch where you walk on your way over there, Dianna. Don't let the skirt trail in the dirt, or soil your slippers."

Phoebe was already dressed when Contrition ran up to her room, and her maid was putting the finishing touches on her hair. Ringlets and more ringlets, a plethora of ringlets, intertwined with artificial rosebuds that were the same pale-pink satin as her gown. But for all her splendor, and Elizabeth Haywood had seen that no expense was spared, Phoebe's eyes were shadowed, and Contrition could see faint traces of tears that she had shed earlier.

"Phoebe, you're beautiful! Even if you weren't the one this ball is being given to honor, everyone would be looking at you and admiring you." Phoebe did look pretty, Contrition wasn't saying those things just to make her feel better, but she wished that Lotta and Vangie could have got their hands on her to fix her up for the ball. All those sausage curls just weren't right for Phoebe and the pink dress was too fussy, too what Lotta called "busy." The dress and the curls distracted attention from Phoebe herself, and that was a mistake that no actress could afford to make.

"I'm not beautiful at all. I've always been plain. You don't have to flatter me, Dianna, I know what I look like. I'm passable, but that's all. You're the raving beauty. Mama will turn green with envy when she sees that dress! Wherever did you get it? We didn't see anything like it in the pattern books."

"Lotta made it. She makes all my clothes," Contrition confessed.
"I can't afford a dressmaker."

"Then Lotta could make her fortune as a dressmaker. If she opened a shop in Albany, she'd be swamped with orders," Phoebe declared. "All right, Agnes. You can go, there's nothing more that can be done for me. If people don't like me the way I look now, then they'll just have to put up with me."

"All right, Phoebe. What have you been crying about?" Contrition demanded as soon as Agnes had left the room.

"It's Grandmother. She isn't coming down to the ball. She said she wasn't going to watch me being thrown to the wolves and that was that! And I did so want her! I'm sure that Grandfather and Mother are relieved she's not coming . . . you know how she is, she might say something that she shouldn't. She doesn't want me to marry Mr. Coverdale, you know. Nobody will remark on her absence. She hasn't attended any social affairs for years, not ever since I can remember. But if she doesn't come to my wedding and wish me happiness, I think I'll die! It's such a pity that her health doesn't allow her to attend social functions, even here at home."

Rot and nonsense! Contrition thought. Jewel not attend any social function right here at home if she wanted to? In a case like Phoebe's engagement ball, no power on earth could have prevented her from putting in an appearance if she hadn't been so strongly against the marriage.

"Maybe you should take heed of your grandmother's feelings. It isn't too late to back out. All you need to say is no, you will not become engaged to Mr. Coverdale! If you want to go and tell your grandfather right now, I'll go with you and lend you moral support."

"Dianna! That would be disgraceful; we'd never be able to hold our heads up in society again if I did such a thing!"

"I thought you didn't care all that much about society." Contrition picked up the hairbrush and went to work on a curl that persisted in sticking out at an odd angle. "I've got to do something about these curls. There are altogether too many of them!"

Ruthlessly, she attacked the offending curls, brushing more than half of them out, leaving only three at each side of Phoebe's face and sweeping the others up at the back. Rosebuds flew as she

plucked them out, allowing only those at the top of the side curls to remain. That was better. It wasn't as good as Lotta or Vangie could have done, but it was certainly better than Agnes had done. Phoebe's face wasn't eclipsed by curls and rosebuds now, it was able to hold its own in all its sweet, gentle purity.

"Phoebe, you're barely seventeen. You'll have to live your whole life with that man. Do you understand that?" From her own vast experience at barely eighteen, achieved only two weeks ago and unremarked except for the birthday cake Lotta had made for her, Contrition felt infinitely wiser than her little one half of a sister.

Phoebe's face paled still more, and it had been pale enough to start with. "Dianna, don't say such things! I have to marry Mr. Coverdale, it's all settled. And he is very handsome, you must agree that he's very handsome."

Contrition took one last tug at Phoebe's hair out of pure frustration. "I've been given to understand that Satan was very handsome, too, before God threw him out of heaven!"

Phoebe gasped, shocked to the core. "Dianna! You mustn't say such things, it's wicked! And oh, dear, I promised Grandmother that I'd send you to her directly you arrived so she could see your gown, and if this is the way you're going to behave, making me more nervous and upset than ever, I hope you'll stay with her until the ball starts!"

"Don't you dare cry! Your eyes will get all red and you'll be disgraced!" Contrition snapped. "If you're determined to throw your life away, at least have the courage to do it without crying!"

"Oh, you're horrid! You're being as horrid as Grandmother!" For once in her life, Phoebe showed a spark of spunk. "Go on, go to Grandmother, I can manage without you!"

Contrition went, and when she tapped at Jewel's door and flung it open without even waiting to be asked to enter, her face was flushed with fury. Why couldn't Phoebe have inherited a little of Jewel's fire and courage?

"So there you are! And looking like a fashion plate, the prettiest sight I've seen for years! Where under heaven did you come by that dress? It's magnificent. I thought that your circumstances didn't extend to a gown like this!"

"They don't. My maid-companion made it. She's very talented." Lotta would be thrilled when she told her that both Phoebe and Jewel had exclaimed over her dress.

"She's a genius, that's what she is! I take it that my granddaughter is going to go through with it. The thought of Phoebe being married off to that skunk makes me retch. Your own description of him, I might remind you. It's plain from the expression on your face that you had no success in talking her out of it."

"I'm afraid she is. Our little brown mouse is about to allow herself to be eaten alive. All I can get out of her is that Mr. Coverdale is very handsome!" The snort with which she ended her sentence not only conveyed her disgust, but was so much like the snorts that Jewel used to convey her own disgust that Contrition was shaken all over again. Criminy, what if Jewel had noticed? She'd have to be more careful; a careless word or even a small mannerism might give her away.

Jewel was too filled with her own anger to have noticed anything as insignificant as a snort. Her husband had informed her coldly that if she said one more word to Phoebe against the betrothal, he would see to it that Phoebe did not visit her until after the event was an accomplished fact.

Raging, Jewel told Contrition, "They do everything they can to keep her away from me! She hasn't been allowed to spend more than a few minutes at a time with me for the last month!"

"I've noticed that. Whenever she comes up with me, her mother tells her that she wants her back downstairs directly on one pretense or another, and she doesn't come back up."

"I'm not through yet, engagement or no engagement!" There was the fire of determination in Jewel's eyes. "The engagement will be a long one—the marriage isn't to take place until next summer—and I vow that unless that husband of mine and dear Betty don't contrive to lock me away entirely so that I can never see the girl at all, I'll find some way to put a stop to it! That's why you're so important to me, Dianna. My husband and Betty wouldn't hesitate for a moment to pack me away, send me to the country, perhaps, with a nurse and a couple of servants they trust to look after me, but they can't use any such threats against you. As long as you give them no indication

that you're against the marriage, you'll have free access to her. I have an ally now, and you'd better be a good ally or I'll make you wish you had been!"

Contrition grinned at her. "Now who's making threats! And just what do you think you could do to me?"

Jewel was eyeing her with speculation. "You're an attractive girl and Myron is a chaser. Couldn't you contrive to flirt with him so that he'd put himself in a compromising position with you? If our Mr. Coverdale were caught with you in his arms, with you screaming for him to unhand you, even Phoebe would have to see the light, and if we made enough of a public scandal of it, John and Betty would be forced to allow Phoebe to break off the engagement."

"Why, Mrs. Haywood! I had no idea that you could be so wicked!" Contrition said, her voice filled with laughter. "But your sneaky little scheme wouldn't work because Mr. Coverdale has already looked me over, examined me thoroughly, and dismissed me as not being worth his while."

"Not busty enough," Jewel said inelegantly. "He's that type. Extra padding wouldn't fool him, either; he's had too much experience to be taken in by any artifice like that. Well, between us we'll think of something! Get on downstairs now, girl, and give my timid granddaughter some moral support."

"I'll do that." On impulse, an impulse she couldn't resist, Contrition leaned down and kissed Jewel's cheek. The lined face felt as soft as velvet under her lips. It was all she could do to keep from crying out, "I'm your granddaughter, too! Why don't you know me, why don't you recognize me?" If she'd been shaken before, now she was so shaken that she felt her legs tremble, and she turned away quickly and nearly ran from the room before Jewel could see how agitated she was.

By the time she had descended the staircase, the first guests were arriving. Belatedly, she remembered Jewel's injunction, soon after she'd arrived in Albany, that she should take a good look at the young man Phoebe had been taken with last winter, before her grandfather and her mother had made sure that she would have no opportunity to see him again. Drat it, Jewel had forgotten to tell her

his name! How was she supposed to know which young man to take a good look at?

She hesitated, nearly turning to go back up and ask Jewel for the name, but from the receiving line, Phoebe cast her an anguished look, begging her to stay near. Elizabeth was regal in purple satin, the fashionable sausage curls making her round face look even heavier and emphasizing her jowls. John Haywood was austere in his evening clothes, his eyes filled with cold satisfaction over the successful culmination of his plan to make a match between Phoebe and Myron Coverdale, thus cementing a bond between two of the most influential families in the state. Gerald Haywood was so handsome that Contrition's breath caught, his ruffled shirt and black evening jacket setting off his fair hair, looking every inch the dignified, intelligent, successful man well on his way to the governorship.

But Phoebe, although she had herself under control, was as pale as milk, and Contrition could see how stiffly she held herself to conceal her trembling at being the center of attention. And at the end of the line, there was a young man Contrition had never seen before. Walter, home from Colgate for this momentous occasion, her other one half of a brother. He didn't look at all like that young scamp David. He looked like his father, except that there was intelligence and humor in his eyes, and no trace that Contrition could see of family pride. Walter, Contrition decided, her heart sinking, was every bit as nice as David and Phoebe. Why couldn't he, at least, have been as horrid as John and Elizabeth Haywood?

The ladies, even those who were well past the age of flirtation, were looking at Gerald Haywood with eyes filled with admiration and simpers on their faces. Contrition noted, her lips tightening, that her father gave each of them some personal compliment that made them simper all the harder. Prince Charming with feet of clay, Contrition thought, bile rising up in her throat. The same charm and feet of clay that had attracted Effie to him and made her capitulate, the capitulation leading directly to Lelia's downfall when Gerald had mistaken her for Effie in the dark.

Lelia had never attended a ball in this mansion. She'd been a servant here, standing well outside the charmed circle. But Con-

trition was here, and she wished fiercely that her mother could see her now, in the dress Lotta had made for her, a guest in this house where her mother had been a servant.

The ballroom took up the entire bottom floor of the south wing of the house. If Contrition had been made of lesser stuff, she would have been cowed by its magnificence, the first ballroom she had ever set foot in in her life.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, ablaze with candles that reflected on the polished floor and the mirrors. Velvet-cushioned gilt chairs lined the walls. The tall windows were hung with maroon velvet drapes that matched the chair cushions, and there were banks of ferns that turned the room into a garden.

She'd imagined such rooms, her mother had described this very ballroom to her when she'd been a child, but still she hadn't had any notion of how large it actually was. All of elite Albany was here tonight, and guests from further away. It was a setting, and an occasion, fit for a princess, but Contrition wondered if any princess had ever felt as small and insignificant and lacking as Phoebe felt right now.

There was Myron Coverdale himself, as resplendent in his evening clothes as John and Gerald Haywood. The distinguished gentleman and sad-faced lady who had entered with him had to be his mother and father, and at least two other gentlemen who made up their party had the look of Coverdales as well.

Looking at Mr. Coverdale Senior, Contrition saw in him the same qualities that his son possessed in such abundance, the same roving eye, the same lecherousness as he regarded the female guests. No wonder Myron's mother looked so sad and so resigned.

Being not only young and more than passably attractive, but the Haywoods' special guest as well because she was Phoebe's friend, Contrition had no lack of dancing partners. If she had happened to be a husband-hunting young heiress instead of a penniless, orphan bastard, she'd have the pick of the crop right here in this ballroom. Knowing as she did that she was no heiress and that her social standing was no more than adequate to make her welcome in this company, she was filled with wry amusement as she thought what

shock and horror would reflect on those attentive faces if the young gentlemen dancing attendance on her should be told the truth.

I ought to tell them, she thought as she waltzed with an agreeable young man with an agreeable face and an agreeable manner, the waltz itself as agreeable a pastime as Contrition had ever been privileged to indulge in. Jonathan Yeats had taught her well, and she danced as though she had spent her life on a ballroom floor instead of having learned in grassy meadows at the campsites where the Olympians had left their Conniewagons and horses, and without music at that, except for Lotta's humming in her sweet, clear voice. She'd liked the dancing then, but now that there were polished boards under her feet, she knew how much she had missed.

She tried to make her way to Phoebe after the piece was over, but the room was crowded and people got into her way. She came face to face with John Haywood who looked at her in the same abstracted, faintly puzzled manner he had looked at her a half a dozen times before.

"Miss Verndon. You remind me of someone, but I can't put my finger on it. Are you sure that none of your family ever lived in or near Albany?"

Contrition's heart almost stopped. At the same time, she was elated that John Haywood was puzzled because it would make her revenge on the Haywoods all the more effective when he finally learned who she was.

"I'm quite sure, Mr. Haywood. Just as sure as I am that I never saw you before I arrived in Albany."

John Haywood fixed her with his piercing stare. "All the same, it's strange. I'm certain that you bear a resemblance to someone I've met at some time or another. Never mind, it will come to me."

It had better not, at least not yet! Contrition thought as she turned away from him, but not before she heard Betty Haywood say, her voice filled with annoyance, "Really, Father! How could you possibly have been acquainted with any of Miss Verndon's family? They aren't anybody, after all!"

Myron Coverdale appeared in front of her, bowing a stiff little bow. "May I have the pleasure, Miss Verndon?" There was so much

distaste in his face that Contrition knew that Phoebe had asked him especially to dance with her.

"Why, Mr. Coverdale, I will be delighted!"

He was a good dancer, she had to give him that, but he held her at arm's length as though he disliked coming into personal contact with anyone as lowly as she was, so unworthy of his attentions. Deliberately, Contrition stamped on his foot.

"Oh, excuse me, Mr. Coverdale! You'll have to forgive me. A young lady like me who's only had cows and chickens to dance with isn't too expert on a ballroom floor."

"It's quite all right." Myron's look at her was startled and filled with even more dislike. "Surely you're jesting, Miss Verndon? You surely didn't have personal contact with cows and chickens?" His nostrils pinched together, for all the world as though he had detected the odor of the barnyard on her.

"But certainly I did! I can milk more cows in an hour than anyone else in our county, I'm quite famous for it! Have you ever milked a cow, Mr. Coverdale?"

Myron held her even further away from him. "I am afraid that I have never had the opportunity."

"You don't know what you've missed! Of course you have to be careful around a cow barn; it's no place for polished boots. You must bring Phoebe to visit me on the farm some day, after you're married, and I'll personally introduce you to the pleasure of milking a cow. I'll remind you to be careful where you step."

The shock on his face made her bite her tongue to keep from laughing, and when the piece ended he escorted her from the floor with relief so obvious that she could hardly restrain herself from tripping him. Conceited, supercilious ass! Phoebe couldn't marry him, she just couldn't!

Left standing alone, Contrition sensed that another gentleman had come up behind her, but before she could turn around, she heard a plaintive voice.

"Might I add my name to your card if there is a place left? I'm afraid that I arrived late, or I most certainly would have been among the first to ask." The voice was a mixture of plaintiveness and hope.

"I had a little trouble driving in from the country; my horse took a notion to misbehave."

Every hair on the nape of Contrition's neck sprang upright in shock. It couldn't be, fate couldn't be so cruel, there was no way in the world that Justin Odets could be at this ball! And if it were Justin, then why hadn't that naughty Zeus been just a little more naughty and turned himself and the buggy around and taken Justin back home so that he wouldn't have got here at all?

Contrition had the impulse to run, to hide, but there was no time and no place, because here was Mrs. Ethel May Creighton, holding out her hand and gushing, "Why, Mr. Odets! I haven't seen you out in society for I don't know how long! You were away this summer, I heard, and now that you're back you're living at your family's country place, quite the country squire!"

"Mrs. Creighton! You're looking radiant this evening. Would you be so kind as to introduce me to this young lady so that it will be proper for me to ask her for a dance? Arriving late had discommodeed me, I'm afraid."

There was no help for it. Contrition had to turn around and face him. Steeling herself, she turned, and at the instant they came face to face, she not only kicked him sharply in the shin with the toe of her slipper under cover of her voluminous skirts but she hissed at him in a whisper that would carry no further than his ears, "You don't know me!"

Justin's face went white and then red and then white again.

"Miss Verndon, may I present Mr. Justin Odets?" Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was only too happy to do the honors, as fond of Miss Verndon as she was, and as desirous that Miss Verndon should meet some eligible young man and end up marrying him and continuing to live in Albany or its near vicinity, her pipeline to the Haywood mansion and all that went on in it.

"How do you do. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance." Contrition said, her voice sickly sweet.

"The pleasure is mine." Justin had found his voice at last.
"M-may I see your card, M-Miss Verndon?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry, but I'm afraid it's already filled," Contri-

tion simpered, and in that same whisper she'd used before, "Keep your mouth shut! I'll make an opportunity to tell you where you can see me after the ball."

Mrs. Ethel May Creighton rose to the occasion. Why, dear young Mr. Odets was struck dumb by dear young Miss Verndon, and if something should actually come of it, what a coup it would be for her! Miss Verndon would be so grateful to her for introducing her to Mr. Odets that there would be no limit to the gossip about the Haywoods that she would pass on. Besides, a match between Miss Verndon and Mr. Odets would displease John Haywood and Betty Haywood immensely! They only tolerated Miss Verndon because Phoebe had taken such a fancy to her, but the Odets were one of the oldest and most respected families in the county, and as Mrs. Justin Odets, the Haywoods would be obliged to receive her. They'd allowed the friendship only because they thought that Miss Verndon would be gone from Albany in the spring. Mrs. Ethel May Creighton fairly purred.

"Dear Miss Verndon, you go right along and dance with Mr. Odets. Here comes your next partner now, but I'll engage him in conversation and entertain him and explain that I asked you particularly to indulge Mr. Odets as he was so unfortunate as to have arrived too late to contract for partners."

Justin's arm, his whole body, was stiff as he led Contrition onto the floor and led her into the dance. His eyes looked stunned, and in actuality, it was Contrition who led him rather than the other way around.

"Justin, for pity sake close your mouth, it's gasping open as though you'd seen a ghost!" Contrition snapped at him. "And don't you dare give me away, or I'll . . ." the right words came to her ". . . I'll never take Zeus in hand for you again! I'll teach him to hate you! Call me Miss Verndon, and you never saw me before in your life!"

"But how, why, what . . ." Justin stammered. Unfortunately for Justin's curiosity, the dance was a reel, and Contrition moved away from him and he away from her. Up and down they went, smiling, nodding, laughing, at least Contrition smiled and nodded and laughed, her cheeks flushed as though she found the utmost pleasure in the dance. They came together again briefly. "I have a good reason, I

have the best reason in the world for being here under false pretenses!"

"But what could it . . . ?"

Up and down the line again, Justin growing more bewildered by the moment. His head was swimming. What possible reason could there be for Dianna to be passing herself off as someone else, and in such exalted company, company that an actress from a second-rate company of traveling thespians couldn't possibly have insinuated herself into if these prominent people had any inkling of her true identity?

Dianna, his Dianna, pretending to be somebody entirely different! But he'd get to the bottom of it, and whatever her motives were, he'd talk her out of it and into marrying him as soon as decency allowed because now that he'd seen her again, he knew that all of his memories and dreams of her since they had parted couldn't come anywhere near the reality of how beautiful she was, how wonderful and desirable she was, how much he loved her.

If she thought to nudge her way into society, why then, she didn't have to do it by deceitful means. All she had to do was marry into it by marrying him! If high society was what she wanted, he'd lay it at her feet, although he never would have thought it of her. He'd thought her a simple, honest young lady, who preferred a simple life, but that was of no matter because whatever she wanted she should have.

"Dianna . . . ?"

"You don't know me well enough to call me Dianna! Miss Verndon, call me Miss Verndon!" Contrition snapped in a low voice. There was no time for more. The reel was fast, and the movements were taking them away from each other again. Drat, drat, drat! Justin simply wasn't devious enough. He was basically too simple and honest to carry it off unless she kept right on his heels reminding him! Darn it, why hadn't Zeus managed to overturn his buggy, not to hurt Justin or himself, but just to keep Justin away from this ball?

The reel was over and Contrition's fingertips were on Justin's wrist again as he escorted her from the floor. And there was Phoebe, her face so flushed that she looked as though she were running a

fever, her eyes rapt as she looked at Justin. And Phoebe was saying, "Why, Mr. Odets! When I saw that you were going to be late, I saved two places on my card for you. And this next dance is one that I saved out for you."

Phoebe! Shy-little-brown-mouse Phoebe! She looked starstruck, she looked as though she were moving in some enchanted dream, her face pale now instead of flushed as her eyes clung to Justin's.

Contrition's heart stopped in its tracks. Justin was hers; he loved her, she could marry him tomorrow if she'd only say the word. She could give up her lifelong dream of revenge against her father, turn her back on the whole of her former life, and live out the rest of her life in peace and plenty and contentment. She could have wealth, social position, the houseful of children she wanted. Life on a farm, because she'd never be happy in a city the size of Albany, forever flitting from one social scene to another and having to be nice to people she despised for their arrogance and conceit.

All of that could be hers, except for this entirely unexpected revelation. Of all the men in Albany, of all the men in the world, why did it have to be Justin whom Phoebe was in love with? Complication upon complication; nothing was turning out the way Contrition had expected or wanted it to! If Justin loved Phoebe, and if the Haywoods allowed them to marry, Phoebe would be happier than any storybook heroine in the history of literature. A Justin Odets was exactly what Phoebe needed. They were exactly right for each other.

Not caring an iota what kind of an impression she was making, Contrition dodged her next partner and moved around the perimeter of the ballroom to keep Phoebe and Justin in sight. How beautifully Phoebe waltzed! Her feet scarcely seemed to touch the floor. In Myron's arms, she'd been stiff and terrified of making a misstep, her eyes looking like a frightened doe's, ready to jump out of her skin if Myron said as much as a word to her.

But look at her now! She was graceful, she was beautiful, her face had a radiance that Contrition had never seen there before. There wasn't any mistake; Phoebe loved Justin, and Justin was the only man in the world she could ever be happy with.

What on earth! There was Jewel's personal maid, Beulah Grundy,

catching her eye from the entrance to the ballroom and motioning to her. Contrition tore her eyes away from the vision of Phoebe dancing in Justin's arms and made her way to the archway.

"Miss Verndon, Mrs. Haywood would like to see you immediately," Beulah said.

Completely at a loss, Contrition made her way up to Jewel's rooms. She had a sense of foreboding. Her feet didn't seem to want to climb the stairs. But there was only one way to find out why Jewel had sent for her, and that was to let Jewel tell her.

Jewel was sitting in her invalid's chair close to a marble-topped table, holding something in her hand. The light from the flower-patterned glass lampshade fell on her face, her erect head with its crown of white hair, her eyes still as blue as they'd been when she was a girl. Those eyes fixed themselves piercingly on Contrition as she entered the room.

"Miss Verndon, will you come here? That will be all, Beulah. Close the door on your way out."

Contrition approached her, her heart pounding. Jewel handed her what she was holding in her hand. It was a miniature portrait.

"Hold it to the light. Take a good look at it," Jewel said. "I believe you'll see what I see. You've puzzled me, Miss Verndon. Like my husband, I've wondered where I could possibly have seen you before."

Contrition did as Jewel bade her, and her smothered gasp suffocated her for a moment while she struggled to regain her breath.

There was no doubt that the miniature was a likeness of Jewel when she had been about Contrition's age. The eyes looking out at her from the miniature were her own eyes, the dark brows her own brows, the shape of the chin, the tilt of the nose. The resemblance wasn't an identical likeness, but it was there.

"It's been a great many years since my father commissioned that miniature done of me," Jewel said. "It's no wonder it's taken me so long to connect you with it. My son's sins have come home to roost. If I'm not mistaken, your name isn't Verndon, it's Reeves. And you are my son's daughter and my granddaughter, and you have some reason for being here masquerading under false pretenses. Just what are your intentions, Dianna, if that is indeed your name?"

"My name is Contrition," Contrition said.

20

It had been a slightly stoop-shouldered man entering his middle years who had boarded ship in New York City to set sail for Italy, a man of moderate means evidently on a business trip.

Henry's experience with the Olympians had stood him in good stead in the matter of an adequate disguise to get him safely out of the country without being detected. Not that the disguise was an elaborate one; the most effective disguises were the simplest, he had learned. In his case now, the stooped shoulders which made him look older and shorter; the spectacles; the hair combed differently and bleached a little at the temples to appear as though gray was encroaching on the dark; and a slower and more deliberate way of walking. All served his purpose far better than an elaborate disguise that he would have trouble in maintaining. No beard, no padding under his waistcoat to make it appear that he had a paunch, no limping walk with a cane to help him along.

On shipboard, he was taken at face value, again his acting experience enabling him to play his part without a flaw. He feigned dyspepsia which kept him to his stateroom a good deal of the time, along with a good deal of paperwork that he had to complete before arriving at his destination. He was courteous without allowing the other gentlemen on shipboard to draw him into confidences or their interminable card games, playing only two or three times with indifferent luck and then indicating that he had lost as much as he could afford to lose. A conservative man, hardly worth a second glance, and not one to excite any kind of curiosity.

And now he was in Naples at last, and Naples was cold, for all

that it was in sunny Italy. The old city would have fascinated him if he hadn't had more important matters on his mind, such as locating the Palazzo Mazzini and Leon.

The hack that Henry hired after he alighted from the coach that had taken the devil's own time in reaching Naples was dilapidated, the horse that drew it no more than a sorry nag, and the heavily mustachioed man who drove it had not a word of English. But banditlike as he looked, he understood "Palazzo Mazzini," and his vigorous nods indicated that he knew where the Palazzo was.

Wherever it was, it was a good ways on the outskirts of the city. As a palace, it fell far short of Henry's expectations when his driver finally deposited him at its gate.

His stoop gone, his spectacles discarded, the silver at his temples touched up with a bit of dye, Henry was Henry again as he alighted from the hack and stood regarding the home of his cousin's fiancée. The gate was fashioned of wrought iron and rusted, and it was set in a stone wall that was badly in need of repair, looking about to tumble down in several places. The drive that led from the gate to the palace itself was overgrown; the lawns, once resplendent, were neglected, with shrubbery and flowerbeds overrun with weeds.

The palace itself was a large edifice but nowhere near as large as he had supposed it would be as the home of a prince. Here again there was evidence of decay and neglect. The windows could have used a good washing by one of Schenectady's energetic househussies; two of the pots that had once contained plants or flowers and been set on the railing that ran along the patio leading to the door were broken, and no servant had as yet swept up the shards. All in all, this seemed like the most unlikely place in the world to find Leon.

The brass knocker on the heavy door was tarnished. Now that he was at the end of his journey at last, Henry used the knocker with authority, clearly stating that he expected to be admitted. He hadn't come all this way to be turned away, and how the devil was he to get back to the center of the city if he were? Leon had just better be here. If he weren't, Henry would make him sorry for it when he caught up with him.

As authoritative as his knocking was, it was a long time before the

door opened. Seeing that this was a palace, however shabby, Henry expected a footman at the very least, not the dumpy figure of a middle-aged woman dressed in rusty black with her hair skinned into a knot on the top of her head, who regarded him with glittering and suspicious black eyes.

"Signore?"

"Is this the Palazzo Mazzini? Prince Mazzini? Mr. Leon Murdoch?"

A spate of Italian answered him and a command equally incomprehensible. Annoyed, Henry made to push past the woman, only to have his arm grasped by a hand that was surprisingly strong, and a single word spat at him that, even with his lack of Italian, left no doubt that it meant he was to wait where he was.

Henry waited, just outside the door. He could see the entrance hall from where he stood, marble floored, chipped and cracked in several places, and in the same need of a good scrubbing that the windows were. There were tables and chairs in the hall but they were bare of ornament, and where a crystal chandelier should have hung, there was a plain, black, iron chandelier with only a couple of stubs of candles in it.

Signore Mazzini might be a prince, but it was obvious that his principeship had fallen on hard times. Leon, here? Incomprehensible!

The servant hustled away, her worn slippers flapping. Henry waited some more, his irritation growing as the moments passed.

And then there was a commotion and a clatter of footsteps and Leon himself, the elusive Leon who was so adept at disappearing, was running pell-mell down the noble if dusty staircase toward him, his face beaming with delight and an even stronger emotion, one of profound relief. Behind Leon, two other young men descended more slowly, but not so slowly that they didn't give every intention of not letting Leon out of their sight.

Leon grasped his hand and all but pumped his arm right off his shoulder. "Henry! You've come! I'd all but given up hope!"

"I would scarcely have missed your wedding, cousin," Henry said, the inflection on cousin, but his sarcasm was lost on Leon.

"Pellegrino! Braccio! This is my cousin from America, come to

attend the wedding! Henry, may I present two of my Rosalina's brothers, Pellegrino and Braccio Mazzini?"

Pellegrino and Braccio bowed. "Signore." They spoke no English. Both of them were young and dark and lithe and moved like cats. Both of them regarded him through black eyes laced with suspicion, thinly overlaid with the welcome that the cousin of their sister's fiancé had due him. Watchful eyes, missing nothing.

"Pellegrino and Braccio are fine fellows. You'll become the best of friends," Leon enthused, his face still wreathed in smiles. "And then there are Francesco and Mateo, two more brothers whom you'll meet later, and Prince Alberico himself, and Lucia, Prince Alberico's wife, and Piero Sforza and Lorenzo Sforza, two of the Mazzinis' cousins who are staying here at the palazzo. And Rosalina, wait until you meet Rosalina! But come along upstairs, your bag will be taken to your room but first you must come to mine, we have a lot to catch up on. Pellegrino, Braccio?" This last was a question.

Two dark heads nodded. Two lithe bodies followed them up the staircase and along a twisting hallway with marks where pictures had once adorned the walls now showing lighter than the background.

Leon's room was magnificent—in size, at least. There was a marble fireplace that Henry, if he had had time, would have liked to spend at least half an hour admiring. But the windows were hung with drapes that were not only laden with dust, but frayed at the edges. The carpet, while not frayed, was just an ordinary carpet, and not as large as the carpet that had once covered the floor, again discernible by lines of demarcation where the original, and no doubt more costly, carpet had once been.

What furniture there was was of good quality. The bed, Henry supposed, was a masterpiece, and one of the chairs was certainly an antique. The other pieces were more ordinary, as though they'd been bought for utilitarian purposes only.

"Sit down, sit down! Have some wine. Vino," Leon said. There was a decanter on the table, a cut-glass decanter, obviously very old, but the glasses into which Leon poured the wine were ordinary wine glasses of a quality that could be bought for a reasonable price in America.

The wine was passable, anyway. Not the quality that Henry would

have expected in the palace of a prince, but passable. Pellegrino and Braccio each accepted a glass as well and saluted Henry before they drank.

"It's too bad that Matteo isn't here. Matteo speaks English. Not much but enough to make himself understood. Never mind, he'll be here this evening, along with the rest of the family. You'll meet them all at dinner. You brought evening clothes, I presume? We're very formal here at the palace, we always dress for dinner."

"Of course I didn't bring any evening clothes! How was I to know that I'd be expected to bring evening clothes? Besides, I didn't have time to have any made for me, and I couldn't go home to fetch my own. Are you sure that they don't speak English?"

"No matter, we're enough of a size so that you can borrow some of mine." Did that mean that they did speak English or that Leon was just being cautious in case they might understand more than they spoke? "I have plenty with me, I came well prepared."

Whatever was going on, Henry decided that he had better be cautious as well. Pellegrino and Braccio gave no indication that they intended to leave the cousins alone together, at least until they were satisfied that he was just that, only a cousin come to attend the nuptials. What the devil had gotten into Leon, anyway? Even for Leon, who had always gotten himself into scrapes that were almost impossible to extricate him from, this was something else again.

"I trust that you had a pleasant voyage? I hope you can stay for a long time. Italy is a wonderful country, and Naples is a wonderful city. You'll have to see everything, it's unthinkable that you shouldn't enjoy everything there is to enjoy now that you're here at last!" The last two words were slightly emphasized, and Henry, his heart sinking, knew that Leon was indeed in more trouble than he knew how to get himself out of. And, he thought grimly, if Leon thought he was in trouble, wait till Leon heard the trouble Henry was in!

To look at Leon, nobody would guess that he was in trouble. His lean, sanguine face still had that devil-may-care look about it, his manner was relaxed, and he might have been the happiest and most carefree man on the face of the earth.

"When there was no answer to my letter, I gave you up," Leon said. "What took you so long, why didn't you answer?"

"A letter wouldn't have got here any sooner than I did," Henry told him. He set his wineglass down on the table. He would have liked nothing better than to drain the glass and hold it out for a refill. But this wasn't the time to get drunk. He'd gotten drunk once, and look what had happened!

Another servant made a noise at the door which was already standing open. Scratched, no less. What was the matter with a good, honest knock? It was a manservant this time, wearing livery of a sort, but shabby and rusty livery, and he was so old that he shuffled as he walked and his eyes had a distressing way of looking in the opposite directions. The servant spoke a few words though a mouth that was devoid of teeth.

"As near as I can understand, your bag is unpacked and your bath is ready. Dinner is at nine; we dine rather late here at the palazzo. Go and get yourself cleaned up and then rest. I'll be along later with a set of evening clothes for you. You must make a good impression on the prince, Henry. Don't let me down."

Don't worry, I won't, Henry thought. He wouldn't let Leon down; he'd get him out of whatever he needed to be gotten out of for the simple reason that he had to extricate Leon before Leon could clear him of that murder charge. Before he could turn Henry back into a man who could walk in the open without looking over his shoulder, and sleep easily at night without fear of being rudely awakened by a minion of the law, things that Henry had almost forgotten how to do. Damn Leon, anyway! If he'd had to get himself into some kind of a mess, why couldn't it have been just a little mess and in the United States? Why had it had to be in Naples, Italy?

Contrary to what Henry could have wished, he wasn't taken to a room near Leon's but to one in another wing of the palazzo entirely. How the devil was he going to manage to sneak back to Leon's room so he could talk to him without Pellegrino and Braccio standing over them with their ears hanging out, pretending that they didn't understand English?

As a room, it was as magnificent as Leon's. As to furnishings, it was a little lacking. The windows were curtained as shabbily and the bed hangings needed a good beating to get the dust out of them. The carpet was smaller and shabbier, and the tub that stood in front of a

fabulously beautiful fireplace was just a tin tub, rusty around the edges and only half-filled with tepid water. Henry hoped that outside of the rust, the tub was clean. Clean or not, it would have to do. He divested himself of his clothing in short order and climbed into it. It was small and his knees nudged his chin, but there was soap, and water was water, tepid or not.

Clean, or what he hoped was clean, he dried himself on a ragged towel that was large enough to envelop himself in and that must have been soft and thick once but that was now thin and hard and scratchy. He lay down on the bed, covering himself with a sheet that was darned, and waited for Leon to come and tell him what this was all about.

He was doomed to disappointment. It wasn't Leon who came carrying the evening clothes but the old manservant, along with another glass of wine and a salver containing fruit and cheese. At least the Mazzinis were hospitable; Henry wasn't expected to starve until nine o'clock. The fruit and cheese were good, the grapes sweet and juicy, the cheese sharp and satisfying. Henry ate and drank, fell asleep still seething with curiosity, and awoke with hardly enough time left to dress for dinner.

Hoping that it would be Leon who would come to lead the way, he was disappointed again. It was Braccio, his eyes watchful, his footsteps catlike in their silence as he led the way through the twisting corridors and down the marble staircase and through more rooms and corridors until they came at last to a drawing room where the family awaited him.

It wasn't hard to pick out Prince Mazzini. He was older, there was as much gray in his hair as black, his face was lined, and there were pouches under his deep-set eyes. The older lady had to be Signora Lucia, or was Henry supposed to call her Princess? She wasn't very tall, she wasn't very tall at all, and she was as round as she was tall. But she was pretty. There were almost no lines in her face and her complexion was clear and flawless. She was remarkably youthful-looking for her age. Her eyes were beautiful, large and dark and thickly lashed. Her hands were beautiful, small and white and graceful. She wore only one ring, a plain gold band, her wedding ring.

Leon was there, Pellegrino was there, Francesco and Matteo were there, carbon copies of their brothers, dark and lithe and catlike and with the same watchful eyes. Piero and Lorenzo were there, carbon copies of their cousins. And then it didn't matter who was there, because the one other person in the room made Henry forget everyone else.

Rosalina! Henry's breath caught in his throat at his first glance at her. He came near to stammering when Matteo, the one who spoke English, presented him to her after having presented him to his mother and father.

Rosalina was beautiful. Rosalina was the most beautiful girl Henry had ever seen. She could have stepped out of a Renaissance painting. Her complexion was as flawless as her mother's, but where Lucia's skin was olive, Rosalina's was a creamy, translucent white. Her eyes were so large and so dark that Henry felt as though he were drowning in them. Her lashes brushed her cheeks as she lowered her eyes modestly at their introduction, her brows were like the wings of a raven. She was slender, her waist was tiny, her hair was every bit as wonderful as Contrition's had been before Dolly had cut it off and tortured it into those ridiculous corkscrew curls.

If Leon wanted to get out of marrying Rosalina, Leon was mad. That was it, Leon had lost his senses somewhere in his travels throughout the continent, he'd imbibed some bad spirits that had rotted his brain, he'd been ill and the fever had left him lacking in gray matter. Even for Leon, who was without a doubt a connoisseur of beautiful women, Rosalina must be the most beautiful young lady in the world.

The introductions over, they adjourned to the dining salon. The ceiling was frescoed and the walls painted with murals, their colors still bright although they must have been painted a century or more ago. But the exquisite china on the magnificent table was chipped and Henry suspected that the highly polished silver was only plated. The crystal was as fine as Italian crystal was supposed to be, although here, too, there was an occasional chip on the rims.

None of which mattered at all. There was one masterpiece in the room which was priceless above all others. Rosalina. Leon, Henry concluded all over again as Rosalina smiled a shy, sweet smile at

him, was bereft of his senses, else he'd be pantingly eager to marry her.

The food was reasonably good but heavy to Henry's taste, and there wasn't the variety that he would have expected on a prince's table. It didn't matter. He could have eaten sawdust as long as he could look at Rosalina.

Across the table from him, Lorenzo, or Henry thought it was Lorenzo, said something, and Lucia laughed. The laugh all but brought Henry bolt upright a foot from his chair. It wasn't a laugh as much as it was a bray, a shrill, penetrating bray that set Henry's teeth on edge as though a child had run his fingernails across a slate. The bray was colossal in volume, it was earsplitting.

Henry had barely got himself under control when Rosalina asked Lorenzo a question, apparently having missed the point to whatever joke it was that had brought about the braying from Lucia's rosy lips. Lorenzo answered her in a low voice, with a suggestive raising of his eyebrows.

Rosalina's rosy mouth opened, her pearly teeth gleamed in the candlelight. And Rosalina brayed, the exact bray that had just come out of her mother's mouth.

Henry shuddered. He'd get Leon out of this if he had to lay his own life down to do it. To be tied to that bray for the rest of your life! No wonder Leon had sent him that letter, that cry of distress that had had to be answered! Being married to Rosalina would be a fate worse than death.

Swearing that he'd get Leon out of it was a lot easier than accomplishing it. They were watched. Leon, Henry gathered, was not going to be allowed to escape. And now that Henry was here at the palazzo, *he* was not going to be allowed to escape, either, until the marriage had been accomplished.

They were watched not only by Pellegrino and Braccio and Francesco, which was bad enough, but by Piero and Lorenzo, as well. But even worse, they were watched by Matteo who spoke a little English. The brothers and cousins had a system of watching them two at a time, so that there would be no opportunity for the watchees overpowering only one of them and effecting an escape.

And Matteo was always there, never far from their elbows, so that they had no chance to talk and formulate a plan of any sort, and almost as ruinous to Henry's state of mind, he still had no idea of how Leon had gotten himself into this predicament.

Their jailors, because there was no other way to describe them, were armed. To the teeth, Henry thought sourly. The watchful-eyed young men carried daggers, or stilettos, as they were called here in Italy. And pistols.

On the first night of his stay at the Palazzo Mazzini, Henry waited until two o'clock in the morning before he got out of bed and crept silently to the door of his room. His relief was great when he found that he wasn't locked in, but it was short-lived, because he'd no sooner let himself out into the corridor, intending to find his way to Leon's room so that they could talk, than Matteo loomed up in front of him.

"Did you want something, Signore Cunningham?" Matteo's teeth flashed white in the light of a candle in a sconce on the corridor wall. "There is a bell pull beside your bed. All you have to do is pull it and one of the servants will come to bring you whatever you wish."

"I woke up, and I thought I'd see if Leon was awake so that we could catch up on news of each other." Henry's excuse sounded lame even to his own ears. "It wouldn't have been courteous for us to converse with each other in English during the evening when none of your family understands the language."

"I'm afraid that Leon is asleep. I just checked on him to make sure that he was comfortable." Matteo's smile broadened. "You would like some wine, perhaps. If the decanter on your bedside table is empty, I will speak sharply to the servants. Let us have a nightcap together, and you can tell me about your United States of America."

"I wouldn't want to keep you from your sleep," Henry said dryly. "And there's still wine left in my decanter. I'm sure that my cousin has already told you all there is to know about America."

"Everyone is rich there," Matteo said, his eyes glittering in the candlelight. "Like Signore Murdoch."

"Not a bit of it. There are a great deal many more poor people

-than rich, and even the rich seldom live in homes to compare with your palazzo."

Matteo shrugged, patently not believing him. "Always there are a few poor," he conceded. "But the wealthy outnumber them in your country. It must be a wonderful place to live. I don't wonder that my future brother-in-law looks forward so eagerly to returning there after he and Rosalina are married. But we won't be able to spare him for at least another year after the marriage takes place. We can't bear to part with Rosalina, you understand. I'm sure you'll sympathize with our grief at the thought of losing her to such a far country."

"I do indeed. It is entirely understandable." Henry made a stiff little bow and returned to his room. Considering the pistol stuck in Matteo's belt, there wasn't anything else he could do.

They were prisoners, in every sense of the word. First Leon had been taken prisoner, no doubt through his own foolishness, and now he'd drawn Henry into the trap. Henry was furious. He seethed. He paced the floor. He gnashed his teeth. And then, because all of these things were futile, he went back to bed and went to sleep. His last thought before he dropped off was that if the Mazzinis couldn't spare Leon for another year after the marriage took place, it was without any doubt to give the Mazzinis time to strip Leon of all his wealth. The Mazzinis knew a good thing when they saw it, and Leon was it.

Henry must see Naples, he was informed the next morning. Indeed, it would be unforgivable if the Mazzinis allowed him to return to his own country without seeing everything there was to see. Leon would accompany them. Rosalina was busy, preparing for her wedding and she could spare his company since she'd have a lifetime of his company soon enough. The wedding plans had been changed, and she and Leon were to be married in February as the young couple were too ecstatically in love to wait until later in the spring.

They saw Naples. The Mazzini carriage was dilapidated, to say the least, and the two horses that pulled it were as decrepit. Matteo accompanied them on their tour of the city, along with Piero and Lorenzo. Three against two, charming, talkative, their gestures

wide and quick, laughing a great deal, eager that Henry should miss nothing.

Henry was treated to the magnificence of the Castel Nuovo, which had been begun by Charles the First of Anjou in the thirteenth century, with its vast throne room with a ceiling ninety-three feet high, and its church and chapel.

"Renaissance," Matteo told Henry, his voice overflowing with pride. "One of the finest examples in the world. You have nothing like it in your Schenectady, I believe." He made hard work of pronouncing Schenectady. Henry wondered what he would do if he were called upon to spell it. But he conceded, silently, with a grin, that he himself had had a time of it learning to spell Renaissance when he'd been a schoolboy.

They saw the Castel dell'ova, reached by a causeway, which had been built in the twelfth century by the Norman king, Guglielmo the First. It had been, Matteo instructed him, used as a prison for centuries, the prisoners political offenders. Political offenders got short shrift in Italy, but it was the same in the United States of America, without doubt.

They saw the Castel Sant'Elmo, constructed in the fourteenth century and then reconstructed two hundred years later. They visited Certosa di San Martini, built in the fourteenth century and redesigned in the sixteenth in baroque style, dazzlingly ornate.

All of this antiquity got on Henry's nerves. In ordinary circumstances he would have enjoyed it, but right now he would have given his eye teeth to see a raw new house, still smelling of plaster and paint, in Schenectady, New York.

"Sightseeing begins to pall, I believe." Matteo smiled. "A young man such as yourself, such a virile young man, would prefer more lively amusements. They can be supplied, I assure you. We have houses in Naples with the most beautiful girls in the world. But you must not try to visit them unaccompanied by at least two of us, my brothers or my cousins. Naples is a wicked city, Signore. An innocent such as yourself would have his throat cut on some poor street if he were to venture out after dark and alone."

"This evening, perhaps you would like to sample the delights that Naples can offer? You will be able to choose between blondes and

auburn-haired lovelies and dark. All delightful, all unique! Leon, naturally, *poveraccio*, will not be able to accompany us, it would be the height of bad taste, with him to be married in such a short time. It would be an unforgivable insult to my *sorella* and my family."

"*Poveraccio* means 'poor wretch,'" Leon translated. "And so I am, denied the delights you will sample. I'm thirsty, Matteo. Let's find a place to refresh ourselves."

Poveraccio indeed! At the moment, Henry envied Leon, who was to be denied the pleasure of visiting a house of pleasure. In the state of mind Henry was in, Matteo could have produced the Queen of Sheba herself, and she wouldn't have been able to make his blood run one iota warmer. All the same, he had better cooperate. He might get a chance to contact someone, anyone, to whom he might be able to make himself understood. Matteo couldn't be the only person in Naples who understood English!

He forced an expression that he hoped conveyed a suitable degree of healthy lust. "That would be pleasant, thank you, Matteo. I was a long time on shipboard."

Matteo laughed. "I understand. Who should know better than I how hot a young man's blood runs? I myself will accompany you, Signore Cunningham, to interpret for you and to see that you get the best, and Piero will come with us. Piero is always eager for amusement. Ah, here is a place we can refresh ourselves. After you, Signore."

"Do your cousins make their permanent home with you?" Henry asked when they were seated at a table and a waiter in a stained apron was scurrying to fill their orders.

"They are visiting us temporarily, no more, only until the wedding. Weddings are important family matters, you agree?"

And two more guards were important; there had to be enough guards so that no two of them might become tired from their never-ending vigil and have a moment's lapse, whereby Leon might make his escape. Damn Leon! How could he have got himself into this? Leon needed a guardian. Leon, Henry thought wildly, needed to be committed! If he ever managed to get Leon and himself out of this, he'd tell his Uncle Lemuel to put a collar around Leon's neck and keep him on a leash and pen him up at night!

Act, damnit, he told himself sharply. Use what you learned with the Olympians, make Jonathan proud of you! The only chance he and Leon had, as far as he could see, was for him to play the part of a dissolute young man interested in nothing but wine and women, an empty-headed young fop with blinders over his eyes. Play it to the hilt, till the suspicions of the family Mazzini are lulled, until you find a chance to get yourself and Leon out of here!

He suited his actions to his thoughts and began immediately. God grant that Leon would mask his surprise when his steady, levelheaded cousin gave every evidence of being the most dissolute young man imaginable!

What the devil! Leon thought, a considerable time later. This was the third time that Henry had managed to switch glasses with him, Henry's still two-thirds full and Leon's all but empty. It was admirable sleight of hand. He hadn't even seen Henry do it. Henry had, apparently, learned more than acting with the Olympians.

Bewildered as he was, Leon went along with Henry's game, whatever it might be. Henry was up to something. He'd known that he could count on good old Henry. He'd get out of this yet, he'd show Naples his heels, and he'd have sense enough never to be caught in a compromising position with a beautiful young lady again, especially if the young lady were Italian, with a family intent on guarding her honor as well as emptying his pockets!

"About this evening," Henry said, his speech only slightly slurred. "I have a preference for blondes."

"It can be arranged," Matteo assured him, his smile whiter than ever. Matteo, as the host, made a pretense of paying for their wine. Henry protested, Henry insisted on paying the tab himself, although it made his thrifty New England soul shrink. Henry let lire notes fall to the floor, the notes he'd given good American money for, and overlooked a couple that Piero was quick to retrieve and cause to disappear up his cuff.

The footlights were lighted, the actors were onstage, and the play had begun. Now all Henry had to do was to give the most brilliant performance of his life, without having read the script and without any inkling of his lines.

All right, Jonathan, Henry thought, lurching just a trifle as he rose

from the table. We'll see how much you were able to get through my thick skull! You'd better have taught me well, because if you didn't, our goose is cooked!

21

In the days that followed, Henry had good reason to bless Jonathan Yeats for the hours of gruelling instruction he had inflicted on him. A capable actor himself, Jonathan could not abide a mediocre performance, and where Anton had been interested mainly in the twenty dollars Henry had paid over for the privilege of joining the troupe, Jonathan had been determined to teach Henry at least the rudiments of acting.

Playing a role for an hour or two on stage, Henry found now, was a far different matter than playing a role twenty-four hours a day, never daring to let your guard down.

Fortunately, although Leon was bewildered, he was both intelligent enough and desperate enough to go along with Henry's playacting, as though Henry's weaknesses were well known to him and no surprise at all.

"Henry, aren't you overdoing it a little? You know what happened last year, when you didn't control your urge for drink. You came near collapse, and your father came near to disowning you!"

Henry grinned at his cousin, a slightly lopsided, loose grin, not overdone, very much the young man bent on proving that he was in complete control of himself. "Don't worry, Leon. I can handle myself. You mustn't begrudge me my fun now that I'm in this delightful city, enjoying such delightful company, and well away from my father's eagle eye."

"All the same, you should consider your health." Leon was no

mean shakes of an actor, himself, as he played the worried cousin, filled with concern. "It wouldn't do for you to experience another such episode as happened that other time."

Henry had been in Naples for well over a week now, and never once had he and Leon had the opportunity to talk without Matteo at their elbows listening to every word. If Matteo was not available for his spy duties, then one or another of the other brothers or the cousins managed to keep Henry and Leon separated.

"Besides, I'm feeling more than a little envious of you, Leon!" Henry protested. "You're not only the one who inherited a fortune, but now you have the double fortune to be betrothed to the most beautiful girl in all the world! Even if I marry, and I expect that I will some day, I'll never find a girl half as lovely as your Rosalina! There's only one Rosalina, and you got her, you lucky dog! Fate smiles on some people and frowns on others, but hang it, you've had more than your share of the smiles!"

Leon managed to look smug. "I'm sorry that you'll have to settle for second best. But if you don't curb your riotous living, you might find yourself out in the cold as far as expecting to inherit anything from your father. He's warned you often enough that if you don't change your ways, he'll cut you off without a penny! I'm surprised that he let you come to Italy at all, as much as I wanted you to be the member of the family to represent me at my wedding. I should have thought he would have sent good, solid old George!"

"Well, to be perfectly frank, there was a little scrape, and Father thought it expedient to remove me from the country until it blows over. It involved a certain young lady, whom I, being a gentleman, will not name. And so here I am and I intend to make the most of it."

Matteo smirked and said something to his cousin Piero, or was it Lorenzo? They were so alike that Henry still had difficulty in telling them apart. Piero, or Lorenzo, laughed. They were men of the world, they understood and sympathized, and who was George?

Leon, as quick by now to pick up a cue as if he, as well as Henry, had spent months behind the footlights, shuddered. George, he informed his soon-to-be in-laws, was Henry's older brother, stolid, staid, dour, completely without humor, and dedicated entirely to conserving the fortunes of the entire family clan. Having George at

his wedding would have been like having a ghost attending, and besides, George would have pried into all financial matters pertaining to the wedding and afterwards and raised all sorts of objections to the present or future expenditure of any of Leon's funds.

Matteo and Piero, or was it Lorenzo, shuddered and looked at each other, their relief that it was Henry, and not George, who had honored them with his presence, plainly apparent on their faces. A man like George might very well have established contact with a banker in Naples to handle his funds, and if he had not made himself evident at the bank periodically, questions would have been raised and an official come to the Palazzo Mazzini to check up on his whereabouts and well being. A man like George could have caused all sorts of complications.

Nothing was too good for Leon's cousin Henry, who was so unlike the formidable George. Naples being Naples, one of the wickedest cities in the world, there was no dearth of diversions. Henry had never considered himself strait-laced, but he was shaken to the core by some of the diversions Naples had to offer.

The particular house of pleasure to which Matteo and Lorenzo took him night after night was so luxurious, so tailored to stir the senses of even the most jaded of appetites, that Henry had to use all of his art against showing the shock he felt. He'd never thought he'd see so much red and purple velvet, so much gilt, so much marble and crystal, gathered together outside of a genuine palace.

The fair-haired beauty that Henry had expressed a preference for was or rather, were produced, for there were three blondes from which to choose, each of them beautiful, each of them sultry and smiling and willing, even eager, to please him. Eager, moreover, to teach him sensations of pleasure he had never dreamed of and that he doubted had ever been heard of in Schenectady, New York.

There were redheads and girls with black hair and girls with brown. One or two of them were nearly as beautiful as Rosalina, but thankfully with voices that were a great deal more agreeable.

"And if the company of delectable young ladies palls, other company can be arranged," Matteo told him suggestively. Henry took a moment to digest that information, until he realized that

several young lads nearly as beautiful as the young ladies were also available.

"Thank you, but my tastes do not run in that direction," Henry said, hiccupping. "Not that I have any objections to those whose taste runs in that direction, it's just that mine doesn't. I think I'll have Angela again, Matteo, if she isn't already engaged."

"Ah, Angela!" Matteo kissed his fingertips. "You have discernment in ladies, Signore. Angela is by far the most delectable young lady in all Naples! If you hadn't asked for her, I would have contracted for her myself."

"By all means then, have her!" Henry hiccupped again. "I'll take that willowy, black-haired beauty over there."

"No, no, you are our guest, you must have preference," Matteo insisted. Henry must by all means be kept happy, if only because he wasn't George.

Furthermore, Henry always paid the tab, not only for the company of the young ladies, but for the food and wine. Or rather, Leon paid. Having had no idea of the expenses that would arise on this trip to fetch Leon back to the United States, especially expenses incurred in such a place as this, Henry's father and uncle hadn't supplied him with unlimited funds, but only enough to see him comfortably through. Matteo and Lorenzo and the others did not begrudge Henry the money Leon gave him to indulge his fancies. After all, it might have been George who had come! There would be plenty left, Leon's riches were without limit, and in the meantime, they themselves were benefitting. It had been tiresome being cooped up in the Palazzo Mazzini, watching that Leon didn't escape, and these expeditions with Henry were a welcome diversion.

Angela's chamber was hung with blue and gold hangings to compliment her blonde beauty. Angela's bed was gilded, the sheets were silk, the coverlet satin. Angela, in a blue and silver negligée that showed every curve of her body in the most enticing manner imaginable, was the perfect jewel in a perfect setting.

It didn't matter at all that Matteo had said that "*La ragazza È pie Bella che intelligente,*" which Leon had translated to mean that the girl was more beautiful than clever. Henry spoke no Italian and

Angela spoke no English, so her intelligence or lack of it was no obstacle.

The first time Henry had come into Angela's chamber, he had panicked and nearly taken to his heels. He'd had his share of amorous adventures in his school days, but they'd been boyish things, quick fumblings in the dark, always with the dread of being discovered and laid by his heels.

He had had a romantic urge or two toward young ladies both in Schenectady and Albany, but he'd been wary of being enticed into marriage before he was ready for it, and nothing had come of them. And then there had been Contrition, Contrition of the mop of black curls and the eyes as blue as the sky, Contrition with her indomitable spirit in a body no larger than a child's, but by no means shaped like a child's. Contrition, whom he couldn't forget, even for a moment, even here in Naples where he had much bigger problems on his mind, such as how to escape the Mazzini family and get back to the United States and Contrition.

But Angela's hair was a golden cloud, her eyes were deep pools of blue, lashed so thickly that they appeared almost black. Her mouth was a ripe and luscious berry, her laughter as light and golden as her hair. For a fleeting moment, Contrition's image came between them, but then Angela's arms were around him, her tongue was flicking out to caress his lips, to flick inside his mouth. Her body melted against him as though it were made of hot, molten gold. And Henry found that his Schenectady scruples could be forced into the background, as long as it was essential for him to play this part to the hilt. Contrition was the one he loved, Contrition was the one he would always love, but Angela was here and now, and he was forced to make love to her, and as long as he was forced to make love to her, there was no way that he could force his body not to enjoy it. After all, Contrition would never know, and what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

Angela taught him all she knew, and that was several times more than Henry had had any idea there was to know. It was an experience that it would have been a shame to have missed, each man having only one life here on earth. It was an education. It was a pity that he would never be able to use it back in America. Even

after he and Contrition were married, and Henry was determined that she was going to marry him, she'd take an axe handle to him if he dared to do half the things Angel had taught him. Decency was decency! Besides, he wouldn't want to do them with Contrition. He had respect for Contrition. But he didn't have to respect Angela, and that was convenient, under the present circumstances.

He spent the entire night and returned to the Palazzo Mazzini well after dawn, with Matteo supporting him on one side and Lorenzo on the other, scarcely able to walk after his night of overindulgence. Matteo and Lorenzo laughed and shot rapid-fire Italian at each other, well pleased with this cousin of the fiancé of Rosalina who caused them so little trouble. Hadn't they enjoyed themselves almost as much as Henry, once they'd ascertained that he was safely bedded with Angela and would stay there for the entire night?

It was a performance that was repeated night after night. The first few nights, Matteo and Lorenzo took turns guarding the door of Angela's room from the corridor, their muscles and senses alert to any attempt at escape. But night after night, Henry sated himself in Angela's arms, he sated himself with wine, and he fell asleep in Angela's bed, not to stir until they shook him awake in the morning and doused his head in a basin of cold water so that they could take him home.

At the Palazzo Mazzini, Leon was growing not only frantic but disgusted. What the devil did Henry think he was doing, anyway? He never would have thought it of Henry, but it appeared that Henry had fallen victim to the depravities of Naples; that Henry was, indeed, intent only on making the most of it. Henry was supposed to be getting him out of his predicament, but Henry was sleeping in some golden-haired lady of pleasure's arms, night after night, without a thought of Leon and his impending marriage to the beautiful Rosalina with her donkey's bray, and the severance of his fortune from his pocket.

Rosalina simpered, Rosalina gave him long, amorous glances from her beautiful black eyes, Rosalina sighed. Rosalina doted on him. Lucia doted on him. He couldn't move a step during the daylight hours without Rosalina at his side giving him those melting glances, and Lucia on hie other side, giving him equally doting

glances while at the same time making sure that he would have no further opportunity to sully her daughter's honor before the nuptials took place.

Leon's only consolation was that after the marriage, if Henry kept on as he was going and didn't rescue him, Lucia would no longer be his undetachable shadow and he would be allowed to escape from Rosalina's company from time to time.

All the same, he'd go mad. A lifetime with Rosalina, whom he was convinced didn't have an intelligent thought in her beautiful head, would send him stark, raving mad even if she didn't bray. A brief flirtation with her had been one thing, a brief and exciting affair, made all the more exciting because it had been so difficult to extract her from the company and watchful protection of her family, had been desirable. But marriage!

He'd kill Henry. Execution was none too good for a man who would let such a fate overtake his own cousin!

Unknown to the raging Leon, Henry's forays into the heart of the city every night were not without their rewards. Henry wanted to see everything; the palace of pleasure was reserved for later in the evening. There wasn't a den of iniquity that he and his guides didn't visit, there wasn't a street among all those twisting streets that Henry didn't become so familiar with that he could have transversed them blindfolded at midnight. And if he took particular notice of the routes from the palace of pleasure to the nearest livery stables, as well as the quickest routes out of Naples itself, Matteo and Lorenzo didn't notice.

The first act had been played out, and it was time for the curtain to go up on the second. As delightful as parts of the first act had been, Henry would be glad to see it end. The second act, he devoutly hoped, would be his and Leon's escape from Naples and from Italy itself, both of them with whole skins. The third act was far away both in time and distance and couldn't be played until they arrived back in America, where Leon would extricate him from his own predicament by proving that he could not have and had not murdered Miss Flora Baldwin.

On this particular night Henry had, as usual, feigned first drunkenness and then deep sleep in Angela's bed. Matteo had already

checked on him and found both Henry and Angela snoring. Matteo had then retired to another room in the pleasure palace with the delectable brunette Henry had offered to take on a previous evening so that Matteo could have Angela. Lorenzo was already established with an auburn-haired beauty in still another room.

In Angela's bed, listening to her faint snoring, Henry waited until he was sure that Matteo was well established in the arms of the lady of his choice and that he would stay there for the rest of the night.

Henry raised himself up on one arm. "Sorry about this, Angela," he said as his other fist connected with an exact point on her jaw, a blow that would do her no permanent damage but was calculated to keep her quiet for a good time to come. It wouldn't do for her to wake up and sound an alarm because he was missing from her bed. She might not be very bright, but she was bright enough to know that Matteo was paying her extra to keep Henry with her, and if Henry eluded her, she would not be paid. Henry had seen Matteo in conversation with her and seen Angela's nod. Maybe he couldn't understand Italian, but he understood expressions and gestures.

He fashioned a gag from one of Angela's silk stockings that would ensure her silence for even longer, and cords from the rich window draperies ensured that when she did awake, she would be unable to go rushing out into the corridors screaming for Matteo.

He left money under her pillow, a great many lire, enough to recompense her for any inconvenience he had caused her. He was a gentleman, after all.

A drunken young man, a foolish leer on his face, had entered the establishment earlier that evening. An older gentleman left, his shoulders stooped, with spectacles on his nose and the expression of a respectable man who only wanted to emerge from this place and get safely home without being noticed or recognized. No one took notice of his leaving. The guard at the door, after a bored glance, stood aside to let him pass.

Expression, Jonathan Yeats had taught Henry, was everything, expression and the manner of walking and holding yourself, and Jontahan had taught him well.

Down one street and up another, through an alley, veer to the left, another street, turn left again, always on the alert for foodpads, his

ears straining for the sound of footsteps behind him and his eyes for shadows that shouldn't be where they were. It would be an anticlimax if he were laid low at this stage of the game by some denizen of the Naples night with a stiletto in his hand and an itch for a wayfarer's money on his palm.

The liveryman spoke no English, and Henry was careful to speak as little Italian as possible. He had learned the name for a horse, *cavalo*. He knew the word for buy, *comprare*.

The liveryman turned to his son, who agreed that the gentleman wanted to buy a horse.

"*Cielo vendera purche mi paghi bene,*" the livery owner said. "I'll sell it to him as long as he pays me well."

"*Due cavallos!*" Henry said forcefully. "*Due, due!*"

Two horses were quite a different matter. Two horses would leave the liveryman short. He would have to have more money. Having no idea what a horse should cost in Italy, Henry let the liveryman cheat him. He knew he was being cheated, but he had neither the time nor the Italian to argue.

Riding one of the horses and leading the other, he made good time to the Palazzo Mazzini. No one accosted him, and he was thankful for that, unarmed as he was. He'd learned that no man went unarmed after dark on the streets of Naples, but the brothers and cousins Mazzini had made sure that he had no weapons. They were protection enough, and he needn't concern himself about his safety as long as they were with him.

He secreted the horses, well tethered, in a clump of trees far enough from the palazzo so that their hoofbeats would have no chance of being heard.

Bypassing the gate, he climbed over a section of the crumbling wall. Once inside, he removed one of his shoes and then his sock. He had already noted where there was a patch of sand, and he filled the sock with it, tying a clumsy knot in the end. As a jackaroo it was crude, but it would serve. Putting his shoe back on, he approached the palace itself.

As he neared the front door, he made no attempt to be quiet. On the contrary, he began to sing off-key, and his gait became lurching, as though he could scarcely stand on his feet.

It was Alberico who opened the door. "Signore Cunningham! What are you doing here alone, where are the others?" Alberico demanded. It was easy to guess what he was demanding. Henry affected a foolish grin and waved his hand toward the drive that led to the gate.

"They're coming, they're coming!" he said.

Alberico did what came naturally. He stepped outside and peered down the drive. Henry stepped behind him, the blackjack rose and fell, and Alberico was out of the picture.

Henry knew the interior of the palazzo by heart. He had made it his business to know it by heart. Grasping Alberico under his shoulders, he dragged him inside. Henry's handkerchief served as a gag, once again cords from window draperies served for bonds, and a cupboard was at hand, off one of the back halls, a good stout cupboard with a good stout door with a good stout latch that latched from the outside and was unopenable from the inside. Alberico was deposited among mops and brooms and buckets. So much for Alberico.

Back to the entrance hall, and up the stairs. Henry went up fairly silently, singing only a little in a drunken voice. Braccio was posted outside Leon's bedroom door. Henry staggered and grinned, putting his fingers to his lips.

"Shhh! Mustn't wake everyone up! Matteo and Lorenzo are bringing *vino*, do you want some?"

The "*shhh*" Braccio understood, and *Matteo* and *Lorenzo*, and *vino*. "Si," Braccio said, his white smile flashing.

Henry turned to crane back down the hallway, his head cocked as though he were listening. Braccio came to stand beside him and likewise crane for his first glimpse of Matteo and Lorenzo bearing *vino*. Braccio went down just as Alberico had gone down. Braccio was bound just as Alberico had been bound. There was another cupboard, the palazzo abounded with cupboards, and that was fortunate because Henry would not have relished the task of carrying Braccio down the stairs to lodge him with Alberico.

Leon's door opened a crack, and one of Leon's eyes peered out. "What the devil's going on! I thought I heard a thud . . ."

"Shut your mouth," Henry said. "And give me a hand. Braccio's heavy. Be quiet, if you value your neck!"

The two of them made short work of stowing Braccio in the upstairs hallway cupboard. Back in the relative safety of Leon's room, Henry told him to grab up every penny he still had in his possession and a change of clothing, nothing more, and to hurry up about it.

"How the devil did you manage to get away from Matteo and Lorenzo? I saw how you managed to dispose of Alberico and Braccio, but getting away from Matteo and Lorenzo is something else again!"

"I used my head. And the help of a lady who had no idea that she was helping," Henry told him. "Damn it, Leon, hurry up! Get into your clothes and let's get going! Somebody might wake up, or the horses might be discovered . . ."

"Horses? You have horses?"

"I just said so, didn't I? Here, let me!" Ruthlessly, Henry stuffed articles of clothing into a shirt and tied the arms together to form a bulging bundle. "Finish getting dressed while I get a few things of my own, and if you make one sound, I swear I'll break your neck!"

"What lady?" Leon demanded in a sibilant whisper. "Is she blonde? Is she blonde and beautiful? Is she Angela? You lucky dog!"

"Shut up and get dressed."

"I never got a chance with her!" Leon said heatedly. "I saw her, but I got myself in a card game first and the opportunity was lost, and now you've had the luck to get her!"

Henry felt like hitting him. "Get dressed! Never mind Angela, you didn't miss much." He'd never known that he was such a good liar, but this was no time to go into Angela's charms, it would take all night.

"You would say that, just to make me feel better! I know how much I missed; you needn't try to soothe my ruffled feelings!"

"Maybe you'd like to stop off at the pleasure palace and have an assignation with her before we leave Naples," Henry snapped. "And when someone goes to ask her if she can accommodate you, she'll be found bound and gagged, and Matteo and Lorenzo will be roused by

all the screaming and shouting. You go right ahead if you want to, but I'm getting out of Naples as fast as my horse can carry me!"

Leon came to his senses. Henry had disposed of Matteo and Lorenzo, Henry had disposed of Alberico and Braccio, Henry had horses! And dawn was still hours away, they'd have a long head start, and if they didn't get clean away then something was wrong with their heads.

All the same, they'd better hurry. In record time, the cousins were out of the palazzo without waking any of the others who were sleeping peacefully, secure in the belief that Henry was under secure guard by Matteo and Lorenzo at the pleasure palace, and Leon was under secure guard by Alberico and Braccio at the palazzo. They pushed the horses fast but not too fast. They didn't want to founder them, and besides, Henry was consumed with curiosity that could at last be satisfied.

"How in tunket did you get yourself into a mess like this?" he demanded through gritted teeth. "Engaged to a princess, or is she a princess? I never did get that straight! The daughter of a genuine prince, anyway."

"Oh, he's genuine enough, for what it's worth. You can't turn around in Italy without stumbling over some prince, down on his luck; the country's crawling with them! There were so many little principalities, all of them always fighting each other so that half of them were always down on their luck. And they had big families and all the sons were princes, and they retain their titles even if they don't mean much any more. The Mazzinis are on their last legs. Didn't you notice that the palazzo was stripped of practically everything of value? They've been selling off their paintings and antiques for years."

"But Rosalina! How did you get involved with Rosalina? I thought highborn Italian girls were protected, guarded from scoundrels like you!"

"It was Matteo," Leon told him glumly. "The first night I was in Naples, and glad enough to get out of the clutches of another beautiful young lady and her family, I got myself in a card game that he was also participating in. And he lost. He lost and he lost and he lost. To me. You know I was always lucky at cards." Even in the

dim moonlight, Henry could see his cousin smirk. Lucky at cards and lucky in love, how lucky could one man get?

"Well, Matteo couldn't pay up. And he was so desolate at the smirch on his honor that he claimed he was going to kill himself, and I told him to forget it, and he said he couldn't forget it, that it was a matter of honor, and I told him that it didn't matter in the least, that I could well afford it and that I'd take it most unkindly if he made me feel that I was responsible for him killing himself.

"The upshot of it was that he was so grateful that he took me home with him and introduced me to his family, and there was Rosalina. And there she was, a couple of evenings later, all alone in the garden. It was summer then, you know, and the roses were in bloom, and there was a moon, and Rosalina was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. How could I help but put my arms around her and kiss her and tell her I loved her, when her eyes were begging me to do that very thing even if she couldn't tell me so in English?

"And then there was Prince Alberico, and there were Matteo and Pellegrino and Braccio and Francesco, and Rosalina's honor had been sullied, and there was no way I could make it right except by marrying her. And the next day there were Piero and Lorenzo, the cousins, and I was a prisoner under guard and the wedding plans were set in motion."

"You were had," Henry told him flatly. "You idiot, you were had! They planned the whole thing as soon as they found out that you're rich."

"I know it," Leon said, shamefaced. "I fell right into the trap as if I were a green schoolboy. But believe me, I've learned my lesson! Just let me get out of Italy and I swear that I'll never look at another girl as long as I live!"

"Horse manure!" Henry said. "Now let's save our breath to ride!"

22

CONTRITION felt as if the floor had dropped out from under her feet. With the miniature of Jewel in her hand, one thing was explained, at least. She knew now why John Haywood had kept looking at her with such a puzzled expression and saying that she reminded him of someone. It hadn't been her mother, Lelia, after all. She didn't look the least like her mother, but there might have been some gesture, some expression that crossed her face, that had struck a chord in his memory, even though she would have wagered that he'd never given Lelia a second thought once the Haywoods had packed her off, pregnant with Contrition, as the bride of Amos Reeves.

This changed everything. She'd thought that she had time left, enough time, weeks of it, to try to do something to prevent Phoebe from marrying Myron Coverdale before she announced to the whole of Albany that she was Gerald Haywood's bastard daughter. Now she would have to do something immediately, this very evening, she'd have to get back downstairs and corner Mrs. Ethel May Creighton and pour out her story before Jewel had a chance to tell her father and her grandfather who she was and before they found a way to prevent her from making her revelation.

"Well?" Jewel demanded, her sharp eyes pinning Contrition to the spot. "Would you be kind enough to tell me what you're doing here, masquerading as someone else?"

"I'm here to bring my father to ruin," Contrition said. "I don't have to tell you why, do I?"

"So John lied," Jewel said. "It's true, you're Lelia's child, she was telling the truth when she said that Gerald had made her

pregnant when he mistook her for Effie. I had my suspicions, but there wasn't any way I could prove it, and John swore that Lelia wasn't pregnant, he swore that Lelia was merely trying to make the most of the situation. He told both Gerald and me that she admitted it when he frightened her by threats of having her put in prison for attempted blackmail, that she'd taken advantage of Gerald's deplorable mistake in order to extract enough money from my husband so that she could marry Amos Reeves and they could buy a farm. John told me that he gave them the money in order to get rid of her because she was a troublemaker. After all, Gerald had taken advantage of her, and John said we owed her something for that."

Contrition stared at Jewel, clasping the miniature so hard that the edges bit into her fingers. "And you let him get away with it! What kind of a woman are you, to let your husband sell my mother into slavery, into a life of hell? I liked you, I thought better of you, but you're like the others, you're like my father and my grandfather, cold and heartless, and I'm glad that I'm going to bring you to ruin, all of you, every one of you except Phoebe and David and maybe Walter!"

"The sins of the fathers," Jewel said, a wry smile playing around her lips. "how our mistakes come home to roost! I'll tell you what kind of a woman I was, Dianna. I was a crippled woman, a virtual prisoner in this house, and Lelia was kept away from me so that she couldn't tell me the truth. There wasn't a thing in the world I could do. And what John told me might have been true. Lelia wouldn't have been the first girl to try to better herself by taking advantage of the first situation that presented itself. I didn't even blame her for it. Being the wife of a substantial farmer was certainly more appealing than being a servant, no matter how well-treated she was.

"But you malign my son. Gerald would have married your mother, he was horrified at what he'd done, filled with guilt and remorse. He would have done right by her if his father hadn't convinced him that Lelia had taken advantage of his mistake to better herself. And John contrived to send him away so that Lelia couldn't convince him of the truth. He told Gerald that he'd look into the matter thoroughly and get to the truth, and that there was ample time

for a marriage to take place if he ascertained that Lelia was indeed with Gerald's child.

"Gerald was always under his father's thumb. He thought that his father was wiser in such matters, and so he left it in his hands and went away, and by the time he came back, John had already married Lelia off to Amos Reeves and sent them packing. John told Gerald that it had been just as he'd suspected, that Lelia had been attempting blackmail, but now the matter was taken care of and he need never think of it again except to learn a lesson from it and mend his ways."

"All the same, he should have found out for himself, he shouldn't have left his father to handle it!" Contrition's eyes were blazing. "He went along with whatever his father told him, and even foolishness and weakness doesn't excuse that!"

"Gerald saw his whole future crumbling around him," Jewel told her. "He was already engaged to Betty, the marriage was to take place in the near future, everything he wanted in life hinged on it. If he didn't love Betty, he didn't love Lelia either. Marrying Lelia, a servant in his own house, would have ruined him, and if Lelia was lying, he'd have thrown his life away for nothing. You must realize that John moved very fast, that the entire thing was accomplished before Gerald had too much time to think about it, Dianna. And he was very young, he was used to letting his father make all the decisions. You are right that that doesn't excuse him, but doesn't it leave room for a little human understanding of how it might have happened?"

"If I hadn't been helpless, if I'd had time, I would have got to the truth of the matter, and I would have told Gerald where his duty lay. But Gerald, I can assure you, had no idea that his father wasn't telling the truth, and he's never had any idea that he has a second daughter. Your revelation will be devastating to him, Dianna."

"Don't call me Dianna. My name is Contrition." Contrition realized that her fingers were aching from clutching the miniature, and she made to hold it out to Jewel to return it to her. There was still a little distance between them, and before she could take the two or three steps to give it to Jewel, Jewel rose to her feet and stretched out her hand to take it.

Contrition stared at her, her mouth dropping open. "You're a fraud!" she accused, her voice filled with indignation. "You can stand up, you can probably even walk!"

Jewel laughed, her eyes merry. "Touché! But that wasn't the case when your father wronged your mother, I promise you. I couldn't walk then; I was as crippled as everyone still thinks I am! Even now, I can only walk a little, and it took more years than I like to think about to accomplish that much without anyone being the wiser."

"But why? Why do you go on pretending to be helpless?" Contrition demanded.

"It serves my purposes, that's why. It kept my husband out of my bed for years, not that he minded much, he was never an ardent man, but he would certainly have taken it into his head to try to father another child or two on me while I was still young enough to bear children. There was nothing I could do about his ruining the three I'd already given him, but I at least denied him the opportunity to have any more to ruin!"

"Now, although I can move about a little, I find that I have more power by pretending to still be an invalid. If I were well and John thought I was able to cause him mischief, he'd find a way to pack me off. As it is, he believes that I'm no threat to him. It suits him to have me confined up here where I can't use my tongue on him, and it suits me to be in this house where I can at least know what's going on."

Jewel was laughing, and Contrition found herself laughing with her. Crippled or not, this grandmother of hers had found a way to fight back, a way to exact at least a little punishment on the husband she had come to hate!

Jewel sat down again and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. "Enough of that! When do you intend to drop this bombshell of yours, Contrition? Because I take it that you are going to drop it, and in all conscience, I can't say that I blame you. I'd enjoy it almost as much as you will, if it weren't for Phoebe and Walter and David, especially Phoebe, that poor little brown mouse! The boys are made of tougher stuff, they have a little of my father in them, and of me." She eyed Contrition speculatively. "And you have

enough of me in you for us to be sisters except for the difference in our ages!"'

"I guess I do. At least I got my spunk from someplace, and it certain sure wasn't from my mother. In her place, I'd have never let myself be scared into marrying Amos Reeves; I'd have run off first and found some way to get even for what had been done to me!"'

"I have no doubt of that." Jewel's voice was dry. Her face brightened as a thought struck her. "At least one piece of positive good will come of all this! The Coverdales will never allow the marriage to go through once the scandal breaks! The trouble is, any chance for another marriage, to a man who'd make Phoebe happy, will be ruined as well. You've bitten off a big hunk, Contrition. I'll be interested in seeing how well you do at managing to chew it."

Contrition's eyes widened. "Oh, my goodness! Phoebe's in love with somebody else, and I know who it is! Jewel, excuse me, I have to go back downstairs this minute And don't hold your breath waiting for the bomb to explode because I have other things to do; I've got to get Phoebe and the man she loves together before I bring your house tumbling down around your heads!"'

"Then see that you do it!" Jewel said, her voice tart. "Once that's done, if you can pull it off, I'll stand solidly behind you when you make your claim that you're Gerald's bastard daughter! I don't like throwing Gerald to the wolves, but better Gerald than Phoebe! Phoebe's a deal younger, with her whole life in front of her, and I'd dearly love to see that life be a happy one! Gerald's isn't all that happy anyway, tied to Betty." The old lady's eyes crinkled with mirth. "What a pleasure it'll be, to see Betty's face when her social prestige crumbles into dust! It'll almost be worth seeing Gerald ruined along with her and my husband!"'

"You'd do that? You'd back me up, even knowing how much it will hurt your son?"' Contrition asked, her hand already on the doorknob. Her eyes were wide with amazement.

"Gerald will survive. Phoebe wouldn't. And you're my granddaughter. Of all my grandchildren, you're the most like me. Yes, I'll back you up. You have it coming to you. In your place, I'd do just as you're doing; don't ever think I wouldn't! Go to it, Contrition,

but first try to do something about Phoebe and this young man you say she loves! After that I'll back you all the way."

Contribution ran back across the room and bent to put her arms around Jewel, hugging her close. "Grandmother . . ." Her voice choked. "Yes, you are my grandmother! And I'm going to kiss you!"

"All right, enough!" Jewel said. "You're squeezing the breath out of me!" Jewel returned her hug and kiss with surprising strength and vigor. "Now skedaddle! Go start doing something about Phoebe and this young man!"

"You'd just better believe I will!" Contribution said. She didn't tell Jewel, or even admit to herself, about the sinking sensation she had, the hollow emptiness inside of her as she realized that if she managed to pull it off, if she managed to get Phoebe and Justin together, she'd close the door on all of her own hopes of becoming a contented married woman, with Justin as her husband. *Take what you want, and pay the price.* What she wanted was revenge, and the price was costly, but she'd pay it. Phoebe, her timid little brown mouse of a one half of a sister, wasn't to be thrown to the wolves. Once she had Phoebe firmly established with Justin, then she'd do what she had set out to do and never whimper about what it had cost her, any more than her grandmother Jewel would have whimpered if she had been in her place.

Phoebe was dancing with Justin again when Contribution reentered the ballroom. She'd saved two places on her card, Contribution remembered, just so that she could dance with Justin when he finally arrived. Remembering what Jewel had said about John and Betty Haywood making sure that the young man Phoebe was interested in was never invited to any affair at this house, and that Phoebe wasn't allowed to attend any other affair at which he would be present, Contribution wondered why Justin had been included in the invitation list this time. She expected that John and Betty Haywood thought that it would do no harm this time, as this was Phoebe's engagement ball and it was too late for anything to come of Phoebe's feelings for Justin.

Contribution stood in the doorway watching, and the last vestige of doubt evaporated from her mind. The look on Phoebe's face, as

starstruck as it had been the first time she'd danced with Justin, made Contrition slam that door right now and lock it so that she could never pass through it to find her own kind of happiness with Justin.

Phoebe would never be happy without him; she would live out her life as a timid little brown mouse, her family ruined after Contrition got through with them and with no chance for any other marriage that might bring her even modest contentment. But Contrition was strong, she'd make a life for herself no matter what happened, and she'd make it a satisfactory one, too. Contrition knew how to fight.

The music stopped, and Justin escorted Phoebe back to where her mother and father were waiting for her and Myron Coverdale was approaching to claim her. Contrition made herself even smaller than she was and insinuated herself with all speed through the couples who were leaving the floor so that she could waylay Justin as soon as he handed Phoebe over to her parents and to her fiancé.

"Justin, we're leaving now. You're escorting me home."

Justin looked bewildered. "But the ball isn't over, it's only halfway through!"

"I don't care! Come along. We'll go and tell our host and hostess that I'm not feeling well and you're escorting me home. And take that asinine expression off your face and act as though you're mightily taken with me!"

"I am mightily taken with you! You know that. You know I'm in love with you!"

"Then try to look as if it's love at first sight!" Contrition had been tugging him along as they spoke and now she smiled, a sweet, apologetic smile.

"Mrs. Haywood, Mr. Haywood, I want to thank you for inviting me. It's a lovely ball and I've enjoyed myself tremendously! But I'm afraid that I've developed a headache, and Mr. Odets has been kind enough to offer to escort me home."

Oh, dear! Beside her mother, Phoebe went so pale that Contrition thought she was going to faint. Phoebe, looking at Justin as he attempted to obey Contrition's instructions by looking for all the world like a young man stricken with love at first sight, was so

stricken herself at what she saw that Contrition felt like kicking herself for causing her one half of a sister so much pain.

But medicine is bitter, and medicine has to be taken or you won't get well. Phoebe would just have to swallow this medicine for her own good, no matter how horrid and bitter it was. Maybe after the medicine had taken effect and Contrition had supplied the second dose, the sure cure, which was Justin himself, Phoebe would understand and forgive her and forget the bitter taste in her joy at her complete recovery.

A maid fetched Contrition's shawl. A shawl, at an affair like this! But her finances hadn't run to purchasing an evening wrap after she'd paid so much for the material for her dress, and besides, it didn't matter because everyone knew that she was a young lady who lived in a sort of genteel poverty, whom Phoebe had taken a liking to, or she wouldn't have been here at all.

"Dianna, I hope you feel better soon!" said Phoebe. "I'm so sorry you don't feel well. I'll come to see you tomorrow to see how you are. Mr. Odets, thank you for taking Miss Verndon home." Phoebe might be a timid little brown mouse, but she had spirit somewhere, well hidden as it was, and she was a lady, and she was bearing up. Contrition was proud of her. Between herself and Jewel, they'd make a fighter of her yet!

"I'm glad that you could come and that you enjoyed yourself, even if you feel that you must leave so early." Gerald Haywood's expression was kind, at variance with Betty Haywood's cold face which clearly expressed that she couldn't care less if Contrition were unwell and was only glad that she was leaving. "I hope that you'll recover soon and that we'll have the pleasure of your company at our home as soon as you're feeling better. Your visits mean a great deal to my mother, Miss Verndon, as well as to Phoebe."

Something inside of Contrition twisted and caused her a sharp pain. It was all an act, of course. Gerald Haywood made it a point to be nice to everyone; it was a part of his calculated charm. All the same, he seemed so sincere! If she hadn't known him for what he was, Contrition would have been fooled. As it was, she railed at herself for wavering even for a moment.

"Dianna, will you please tell me what the devil this is all about?"

Justin demanded as he was handing her into his buggy after one of the especially hired hostlers had brought it around.

"Don't call me Dianna." Contrition's voice was crisp and filled with annoyance. "Zeus, stop that prancing around! I know you're glad to see me. I'm glad to see you too, but I'm busy right now. No, Justin, give me the ribbons! Zeus isn't going to move a step unless I'm driving. Justin, my name isn't Dianna, it's Contrition."

"Dianna, your name is not Contrition! Contrition isn't even a name! What kind of a crazy game are you playing? First you're here in Albany when you're supposed to be with Dolly and Anton, and now you tell me that your name is Contrition!" In his agitation, Justin kept ahold of the ribbons, and Zeus balked. "Damnit, Zeus, you behave yourself and get going!"

Contrition yanked the ribbons out of Justin's hands. "Damnit yourself, how in tunket have you managed not to have learned to handle a horse in all this time? Zeus is as docile as a newborn kitten! There, boy, get up! I won't let this nasty man mishandle you any more!"

"I am not a nasty man! I'm a damned well put-upon man, with a horse that hates me and a girl who's driving me insane by being where she has no business to be and by saying that her name is Contrition when her name is Dianna! And just look at that frustrating beast! He's acting as if he never had a wicked notion in his head, trotting along for you like a lamb! For me, he balks or he rears or he turns around and tries to go home or he decides that he's in a race and does his best to overturn the buggy with me in it!"

"He's only having fun with you. He likes to tease you. You have to be firm with him."

"I am firm with him. I'm firm with you, too, and see where it's got me! Horses and women, they're all the same. Ornery, unpredictable, there's no accounting for their behavior; a man would be better off never to have anything to do with either of them!"

"I thought you wanted to know why I'm here in Albany pretending to be somebody I'm not." Contrition said sweetly. "If you're going to be abusive, either to me or to Zeus, I danged well won't tell you! Come on, Zeus, let's see what you can do! I want to see if this idjut has ruined you while I haven't been around to keep you in shape!"

Zeus lengthened his stride and stepped out. Head high, hooves flying, he showed Contrition that it would take more than an idjut like Justin to ruin him. Contrition drew a breath of pure happiness. Some things in life could be depended on, and one of them was a good horse.

"Dianna, stop that! We aren't in a race!"

Contrition grinned at him and urged Zeus faster. Zeus was only too happy to oblige. Justin hung onto the side of the buggy, his face pale.

Contrition pulled in a little. If she'd been alone, she would have taken the corner without slackening pace, for the pure joy of it, but she didn't want to scare Justin to death. She needed him; he was important to her revised plans.

"That's where I live, just around this corner and down the street. Lotta's here, too, she's my maid-companion."

"Maid-companion! You've come into a fortune, then? Some relative died and left you everything and you decided to pass yourself off as a young lady of society here in Albany?" Justin's glare at her was hurt. He never would have thought it of her. "You turned your back on the Olympians just because you came into money, and you turned your back on me, too. You had no intention of letting me know where you were; I had to find it out by accident!"

"I'm all but penniless," Contrition informed him. "Justin, do be quiet!" She pulled Zeus up in front of her rented house and jumped down from the buggy before he had a chance to climb down and assist her. Glory, but it felt good not to have to behave as a proper young lady for a change, even if it was only for a few minutes! "Come along inside. Lotta will probably swoon when she sees you. Phoebe never mentioned to me that you'd been invited to her ball; your showing up all but poleaxed me!"

"The Odets would naturally be at her ball! My mother and father are there too, and my three brothers and their wives and my two sisters and their husbands." Justin spoke with what dignity he could muster. "And seeing that they're there, I can't imagine why you wouldn't realize that I'd be there, as well."

"I didn't even know that your family lives in Albany! You never

mentioned anything but a farm; you didn't say where your family lived. They don't go to the Haywoods' church or I'd have met them there."

"My family are Congregationalists. They're very conservative. We don't see much of the Haywoods socially; my father disapproves of some of Mr. Haywood's business dealings. The elder Mr. Haywood, not the younger. So you're a Presbyterian now? Leave it to you to pick the church that people like the Haywoods attend! Highfaluting people, if you've set out to be a social climber."

"It isn't highfaluting. Everybody is real nice." Well, almost everybody, she added silently. There was Mrs. Ethel May Creighton, and she wasn't nice, and the Haywoods weren't nice, except for Jewel who didn't go to church at all, and Phoebe and David and maybe Walter.

She opened the front door and called out, "Lotta! Lotta, are you still awake? I have a surprise for you, and don't you dare go fainting!"

Lotta appeared at the top of the staircase, a wrapper clutched tightly around her, her hair in curlpapers. "My gracious, Dianna! Why are you home so early? Did something happen? Have you been discovered? Were you thrown out?"

"Nothing like that. See who's here, Lotta! It's Justin."

"Mr. Odets!" Lotta shrieked. "Oh, my goodness me! I'm not decent!" She turned and fled back to the bedroom she shared with Contrition, to snatch the curlpapers out of her hair and scramble into a dress and shoes and stockings. Her head was whirling. Mr. Odets, here! It was all up with them, then. They'd have to pack up and get out of Albany as fast as they could. Poor Dianna! Only Dianna hadn't sounded the least bit perturbed. She all but fell over her own feet getting down the stairs to see what was going on.

In the parlor, Contrition was talking, mincing no words. This was no time for subtlety. Justin had caught her out, and she had to tell him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Then she'd be at his mercy, but she didn't doubt for a moment that she could handle him. Men were like horses; all they needed were a little kindness and a firm hand.

Justin listened, the expressions on his face changing so rapidly

that it was hard to keep up with them. Amazement when Contrition told him that her name was actually Contrition, but Contrition Reeves, not Contrition Laverne, and that she was a fugitive, a runaway with a reward posted on her head on half the inn hoardings in New York State. Indignation mixed with fury when she told him how cruel Amos Reeves had been to her mother and herself; indignation mixed with outraged fury when she told him how Gerald Haywood had brought her mother to the fate of marrying Amos Reeves; consternation and horror, and then sympathy mixed with determination to protect and cherish her, when she brought home to him the fact that she was not only Contrition Reeves, a fugitive and an actress, but a bastard, Gerald Haywood's bastard.

"And so I came to Albany to bring my father to ruin, only nothing's turning out the way it ought to because Phoebe is my sister and she's sweet and good and timid, and she's being forced to marry Myron Coverdale and he's a skunk. And Jewel is my grandmother, and I adore her, and I'm downright dotty about David, and Walter looks like a nice young man, and everything's a mess, and you have to help me keep Phoebe from marrying Myron Coverdale."

Justin was confused, and that was putting it in the mildest possible terms. He was completely bewildered. It was bad enough that the girl he loved was a fugitive and a bastard, and Gerald Haywood's bastard at that, considering the way his father felt about John Haywood. It would be harder than he had thought to persuade his family that Dianna, no, Contrition, would make him a good wife, that she was the only girl in the world he'd ever marry. That would be a real fight, and Justin didn't like to fight. Justin liked to be friendly. All that, which was quite enough for one bewildered and confused young man to contend with, but now Dianna, no, Contrition, expected him to help her keep Phoebe Haywood from marrying Myron Coverdale, and that was even more impossible than making his family accept Gerald Haywood's bastard daughter who had been an actress. Justin groaned. He had a horrible feeling that he was going to be sick.

"Justin, you look green!" Contrition said. "What's the matter, don't you feel well?"

Justin swallowed, not without difficulty. "I'm fine. Dianna, Con-

trition, how am I supposed to help you keep Phoebe from marrying Myron Coverdale?" Somehow, during the course of Contrition's long and involved story, he'd gotten the idea that keeping Phoebe from marrying Myron Coverdale was the first thing on Contrition's mind.

"Why, we'll just have to show her that there's more to life than marrying somebody you don't love just because your mother and your grandfather want you to! Phoebe doesn't have an inkling of what life's all about! I'll wager that she's never had any real fun in her life! You're going to court me, of course."

Justin looked blank, his eyes stunned. "I'm going to court you?"

"Of course you're going to court me! Then I'll, we'll, be able to take Phoebe out of that house and show her a good time and make her see how happy she could be if she didn't marry Myron Coverdale! The Haywoods would never let just the two of us, Phoebe and me, go running around together, but I'll need another girl along when you come to take me out, for a chaperone, you know. And you're eminently respectable; your family is so respectable that even John Haywood or Phoebe's mother couldn't raise any objections if I ask Phoebe to accompany us when you come to take me out for rides through the countryside or anything else we can think of to do. The very first thing you're going to ask me to do is to go and see that farm of yours, and I'll ask Phoebe to come along as the second young lady to make it all respectable, and she'll have a whole day out from under her mother's and her grandfather's thumb!"

"You don't really need me at all. Lotta could go any place you wanted to go, with you. As your maid-companion, she'd make a perfectly acceptable chaperone," Justin pointed out.

"Don't think about it, just do it!" Contrition snapped at him. "I know what I'm doing and you don't!" And a good thing, too, she thought, because if Justin knew what she was going to do her dangdest to do, he wouldn't go along with it at all.

"I don't mind courting you. There's nothing I'd like better. But I don't see that just taking Phoebe out once in a while is going to do any good." Justin was more confused than ever.

"You can drop hints," Contrition said, inspired. "You can drop

hints that Myron Coverdale is a skunk. You're a man, you'd know things like that that I'm not supposed to know."

"Myron Coverdale is a skunk, but how can any decent man go telling that to Myron Coverdale's fiancée?"

"There! You know he's a skunk! You'll find a way to tell her, don't worry about it. The subject will come up naturally, when I manipulate our conversation around to it."

Women! Justin thought. They were devious, they went about things with such circumlocution! It wasn't any wonder that men couldn't understand them.

"You can't take us out tomorrow, I suppose. Phoebe will be tired out from the ball. But you can come the day after tomorrow. And that'll give me time to fix it with Phoebe and the Haywoods. I'll go and visit them tomorrow and tell them that you want to take me to see your farm and that Phoebe is invited too. They'll get the idea that you're already courting me, and that will pave the way for all our other outings. Come early. We'll want the whole day."

His head swimming, Justin couldn't quite put his finger on how he had come to agree. But Dianna, Contrition, was smiling at him, she was positively beaming at him, and he had agreed, and he supposed that it was worth it just to see her again so soon, even if Phoebe would have to go along with them. He didn't have too much time to think about it right now anyway. He had other things to think about, like how he was going to talk Dianna, Contrition, out of causing a scandal that would be sure to make his family positively refuse to accept her as his wife.

One thing was certain in all this confusion. He needed time to persuade Contrition to give up her idea of bringing her father to ruin, and if he got Contrition angry by refusing to do as she wanted, he wouldn't have time with her to persuade her because she wouldn't let him see her at all.

He had an uneasy suspicion that he was being manipulated, but there was nothing he could do about that. And actually, he'd just as soon that Phoebe Haywood didn't marry Myron Coverdale. He didn't like Myron Coverdale, and he didn't have anything against Phoebe. As a matter of fact, Phoebe hadn't made much of any

impression on him at all. A timid little thing, he thought, but if Contrition liked her so much then she was probably much too nice a girl to be fated to marry a skunk like Myron Coverdale.

"If I'm going to court you, you'll have to meet my family," he said, his voice not sounding too happy. "They wouldn't like me courting a girl they don't know."

"I expect I'll have to, but that can wait a while. You won't actually be 'courting' me until you've known me a little longer. You'll just be seeing me while you decide whether or not you want to court me."

"I suppose so." Justin's tone was doubtful. He had a very good idea that if he were seen taking Contrition out more than once, his family would insist on an introduction so that they could decide for themselves whether or not she was suitable. And Contrition being Contrition, there was no telling what she might do or say that would shock them right out of their shoes and make them decide that she wasn't the girl for him at all.

Life had a way of becoming damned complicated, Justin thought. Justin didn't like complications. Justin liked everything to be straightforward and easy and simple. If he hadn't won Zeus in that card game . . .

But he had won Zeus, and he had met Contrition, and he'd fallen in love with her, and complicated or not, he was in whatever it was he was in, up to his neck.

"The day after tomorrow, then," he said, committing himself even as he had an uneasy feeling that he hadn't ought to be doing it.

"And look happier about it when you come to pick me up!" Contrition ordered him. "Somebody might be watching."

23

THERE were shadows under Phoebe's eyes when Contrition went to see her the next afternoon, and her face was paler even than normal. She looked about as much like a radiant bride-to-be as a peahen looks like a peacock.

"Go driving out with you and Mr. Odets?" Phoebe exclaimed, her face going two shades more pale. "You must have made an impression on him, Dianna! He must have been stricken at his first sight of you!"

He was stricken, all right, Contrition thought, but not in the way you're thinking! She hated seeing Phoebe made even more unhappy at the idea that Justin was smitten with her, but there was no way she could tell her what she was about. Phoebe was engaged, Phoebe had to marry the man her family had chosen for her, and Phoebe would never, not if she died of it, thrust herself at a man who didn't want her, who had never noticed her at all! Phoebe might be a timid little brown mouse but she had pride.

"It's nothing like that, Phoebe. I simply asked him about the farm, the one he said he manages for his family, and he was polite enough to ask me if I'd like to see it. He's terribly proud of his farm. He loves his cows and horses and his chickens and his barns and his silos. And I thought you might like to come along; it would be something different for you. Do come, Phoebe! I could take Lotta, but it wouldn't be anywhere near as much fun as having you instead!"

"I don't think Mama would approve," Phoebe said. "Mama and Grandfather aren't very close, socially, to the Odets." Even as she spoke, Phoebe's eyes betrayed her eagerness not only to be in

Justin's company for a day but to see where he lived, so that she could picture him there going about his daily life, instead of having to imagine where he was and what it was like.

"Well, it won't hurt to ask, will it?" Contrition demanded. It would be the living end if Phoebe weren't allowed to come!

Jewel, who was nobody's fool, rose to the occasion. Jewel sent word to her daughter-in-law that she was against it, knowing full well that if she were against it, Betty would be for it. With Betty, it was essential that her authority should supercede that of her mother-in-law.

And Elizabeth Haywood, who was also nobody's fool, decided that if young Mr. Odets were indeed interested in Miss Verndon, it might serve her own purpose. Phoebe was entirely too taken with Miss Verndon, who was a nobody. But considering that the Haywoods and the Odets were not prone to moving in the same circles, it might be a very good thing. If Miss Verndon were to be taken into the Odets's circle then Phoebe would see a good deal less of her, and that was highly desirable.

Betty Haywood pointed out to her father-in-law as much that evening, justifying having given her permission for the outing. Gerald Haywood was not consulted, nor did he expect to be. His father and his wife decided all such matters. Personally, he had nothing against the Odets in general or Justin in particular, and he rather liked Miss Verndon, who was a lively and intelligent young lady and as pretty as a picture, and he was glad that Phoebe had her for a friend because Phoebe was in need of friends of her own age; she was altogether too retiring, and she needed someone like Dianna Verndon to draw her out.

"I think . . ." Gerald said.

He was ignored. He hadn't had high hopes that he wouldn't be. His wife went on speaking to his father just as if he hadn't opened his mouth at all.

"If Miss Verndon begins to keep company with Mr. Odets, she'll be taken out of our own orbit in short order," Betty Haywood pointed out. "And there's a respectable, middle-aged housekeeper at the Odets's farm, so the conventions will be adhered to."

John Haywood nodded. He had the highest respect for his

daughter-in-law's opinions. As a matter of fact, his daughter-in-law, whose thoughts were so nearly parallel to his own thoughts, was the only person in his family for whose opinion John had any respect at all.

"You may be right, Elizabeth. I have nothing in particular against Miss Verndon, but she's scarcely the type of young person we would wish to be Phoebe's close friend. Let Phoebe go, then. We can at least find out from her if it looks as if something will develop between Miss Verndon and young Mr. Odets. And for Phoebe to be known as Miss Verndon's friend will give Miss Verndon enough status so that the Odets will not question her social suitability. Yes, it might be a very good thing indeed."

Gerald took himself off to the library to rehearse the speech he was going to make at his father's fraternity of businessmen three evenings hence. He was very good at making speeches and he enjoyed it. He had a way with words. His father gave him an idea, and he was able to put it in compelling language and deliver it so that people paid attention. Nobody ever interrupted him while he was making a speech, he was the most important man in the room, he was respected, he was the man who was slated to be the future governor of the state, a leader of men.

Behind the closed library doors, working on his speeches, Gerald Haywood could forget that in his own home, he was a nothing.

It was still early enough so that there was a considerable chill in the air when Justin presented himself at Contrition's door the following morning. Zeus's breath showed white as he snorted. Soon the buggy would have to be stored in the carriage house and a sled substituted when Justin wanted to get around.

"Is our outing still on, or wouldn't Miss Haywood's parents allow her to drive out with us?" Justin asked as Contrition came flying down the brick sidewalk from her door before he even had a chance to get out of the buggy and rap on her door as a respectable caller should have done. He'd have to speak to Contrition about her unorthodox behavior, he really would. His parents wouldn't approve, they set a good deal of store by such things, and Contrition had to make a good impression on them or his task

would be that much harder. He'd marry her whether they approved or not, of course, there wasn't the slightest doubt about that, but he loved the farm and he'd hate to have to give it up if they threw him out on his ear for marrying a girl who didn't know how to behave in polite society.

"It's all right, they gave their permission. Let's get going, Justin! Oh, for pity sake, give me those ribbons!"

"Not in town!" Justin was stricken. "What would people think?"

"They'd think that somebody was driving Zeus who knows how to drive a horse!" Contrition answered him, her voice tart, but Justin looked so humiliated that she relented and let him keep possession of the ribbons. "My, but Zeus looks good! He's as sleek as an otter! You're taking good care of him even if you don't know how to drive him."

"I know how to drive him. He just doesn't seem to realize that I know how." Justin's voice was plaintive.

Phoebe was waiting for them, bundled up in a cape with a fur-lined hood and fur all down the edges, the most beautiful such garment Contrition had ever seen. Inside the hood, her eyes were enormous, and her face was as pale as it had been yesterday when Contrition had browbeat her into agreeing to come.

"Well, here we are! I can hardly wait to see the farm. Aren't you excited, Phoebe? You did tell me that you're fond of animals and interested in farms!"

Phoebe's eyes widened. She hadn't told Contrition any such thing, but it wouldn't be polite to contradict her.

"Is that so? I had no idea that you were interested in such prosaic things, Miss Haywood!" Justin was as surprised as Phoebe was, but he was pleased to the point of beaming.

"Oh, yes, Phoebe is enthusiastic about farms and farm animals and country living! She wishes that she lived on such a place rather than in town!" Contrition declared. Phoebe's face turned from pale to a rosy flush in her confusion, a flush that Justin took for enthusiastic agreement. His beam widened, his eyes were warm as he told himself that he'd found a new friend, someone worth knowing.

"Dianna, I . . ."

Phoebe broke off to give a little scream of alarm because Zeus, sensing his master's inattention, took it into his head to start prancing all over the road, thoroughly enjoying throwing Justin into a state of consternation. Any time Zeus had a chance to tease Justin, it made his day.

Contribution snatched the ribbons from Justin's hands. "All right, Zeus. That's enough of that!" she commanded.

Zeus stopped prancing. His head came up, his ears pricked forward. This was more like it! It was just about time that Contribution had taken over the ribbons; now he'd show what a good horse could do when somebody who knew what they were doing was driving him. Zeus stepped out. Zeus's hooves flashed in the morning sunlight, his undercarriage seemed to flatten toward the road, his pace lengthened, his neck arched. Passersby looked at him with awe-struck admiration, exclaiming at the picture he made.

In the buggy, Phoebe looked at Contribution with equal awe. "Oh, Dianna, I had no idea that you could drive! And so well!" There was near worship in her voice and in her eyes. "I've never learned; Grandfather says there's no need for me to know how, that there'll always be a man to drive me wherever I want to go."

"Balderdash," Contribution said. "Who wants to wait on a man's convenience when you want to go somewhere? We'll teach you to drive, won't we, Mr. Odets? There's nothing to it, it's as easy as falling off a log."

"I never fell off a log, so I don't know how easy that is," Phoebe said in a small voice. Justin took it to be a joke. He was delighted. He laughed.

"Well, it's easy. Falling off a log is easy, I mean. And so is driving a horse. We'll turn you into an expert driver in no time at all. Here, take the ribbons." They were out of town now, and the dirt road ahead of them was deserted, it was safe enough, and besides, Zeus wouldn't act up with Phoebe, it was only Justin he liked to tease.

Phoebe shrank back, her body seeming to shrivel inside her cape, her face gone white again. "Oh, no! I wouldn't dare! Please, Dianna, don't make me, I'd be frightened to death!"

She was so timid and helpless that Justin felt protective and

indulgent. "Nonsense. Nothing will happen, I'm right here, go ahead and try."

Phoebe drew a deep breath and tried to control her shaking. She held out her hands for the ribbons tentatively, hands so small and dainty that Justin's protectiveness expanded. She looked at Justin for courage. Mr. Odets wouldn't let anything happen, he'd come to the rescue if Zeus got away from her.

"Like this," Justin said. "Don't keep the ribbons too taut or too loose, just let him know that you have him."

She was driving! Phoebe's cheeks flushed, her eyes were round with excited wonder. She was driving a horse, a spirited horse, a magnificent horse; she knew that it was a magnificent horse because she'd heard her father remark on it.

Zeus trotted faster although it hadn't seemed possible. Phoebe was terrified, but she wouldn't have given over the ribbons for anything. "That's right, just hold him steady," Justin encouraged her, praying that Zeus would behave himself.

"He's running away!" Phoebe screamed.

"He isn't running at all, he's trotting. Zeus wouldn't be caught dead running. Trotters never run, if they do they aren't good trotters. They're trained never to run," Justin told her grandly, the knowledgeable male instructing a timid and unknowledgeable female. "And Zeus is the best trotter I've ever seen, he's probably the best trotter in the county, or even in the state! I've won races with him, a good many races."

Contrition almost bit her tongue in half in her effort to keep her face straight. So Justin had won races, had he! But she didn't say a word. Let him brag, men liked nothing better than bragging to a pretty girl.

"You have? You've actually won trotting races?" Phoebe's voice was filled with soul-expanding awe.

"It was nothing. Zeus is a good horse, that's all, and I'm a good driver, and that's all it takes." Justin was modest. "You're doing fine. Just hold him steady."

Zeus was doing fine for two reasons. He liked to trot, and he knew that Contrition would be displeased if he misbehaved, and he didn't want to displease Contrition. Besides, the little lady driving

him was frightened, and he wanted to reassure her. Zeus liked ladies. He liked everybody, but he had a particular fondness for ladies. He would never dream of teasing a lady the way he teased Justin.

His rhythmic pace, never faltering, ate up the miles. Both of the ladies in the buggy were as little as a minute, the added weight didn't bother him at all, the crispness of the morning air filled him with a zest for living, for trotting, the thing he had been born to do. And he could hear Contrition's voice and it was music to his ears. The other lady's voice wasn't bad, either, now that she wasn't frightened any more. It was soft and sweet and Zeus liked it.

"Oh, my lands!" Contrition's voice rang out, absolutely flabbergasted, when Phoebe, flushed with triumph, had toolled Zeus down the long maple-lined drive to the farmhouse. "I thought you said you lived on a farm! This isn't a farm, it's a bloomin' country estate!"

"Well, yes, but it's a farm too, you know." Justin sounded almost apologetic, but Phoebe's worshipful eyes on his face made him brag a little. "It's a big farm. It's been in the family for a long time, it's where the Odets settled originally, before any of them acquired property in Albany. Before Albany was Albany, even. It was only later that most of the Odets became businessmen rather than farmers." He looked at Phoebe again, and amended, "Gentlemen farmers."

That's a farmhouse? Contrition thought. It's a goldarned mansion! There it stood, all fifteen rooms of it, its red brick mellowed with age to a soft rose, with smoke coming out of not just one chimney but half a dozen. She certainly hoped that the place had a nice big woodlot!

Well beyond the house, screened by more of the huge old maples, the barn's red paint seemed spanking new and fresh, its crossbars and sills painted white. Justin had tried to give her some idea of his family's country place, but she was still flabbergasted. And this was what she was giving up, all because of her one half of a sister! Phoebe had just better have the gumption to take what she was offered, or Contrition was going to be the angriest female ever to walk down the shunpike!

"It's beautiful!" Phoebe exclaimed, her eyes shining. "Whoa,

Zeus!" Overconfident because Zeus had behaved so beautifully for her, she pulled him up too hard, and Zeus's front feet left the ground and he reared.

Contrition made no move to grab the ribbons or tell Zeus to behave himself. Zeus was Justin's horse, let him handle it.

Justin handled it. He took the ribbons, eased up on them and said, "Whoa! Settle down!" in as authoritative a voice as he could manage. Thankfully, Zeus obeyed. "You pulled him up too hard, Miss Haywood, that's all. His mouth is tender."

Phoebe's eyes filled with tears. "I never meant to hurt him! I just didn't know any better. It's a good thing that you were right beside me!"

"You just have to know how to handle them." Justin's voice was filled with self-confidence, and he was thankful that Phoebe was unaware of the sweat that was trickling down his back in his relief that Zeus had quieted down with no trouble.

A groom came hurrying to hold Zeus while Justin helped first Phoebe and then Contrition down, and then led him off to the stables where he'd be given a good rubbing down and cooling out before he was watered and fed. Contrition quelled her compulsion to follow along to make sure that he was cooled out and rubbed down properly. Zeus was thriving without her constant tender loving care, and he'd go on prospering, provided that Justin didn't do something stupid like letting him step in a pothole and break a leg.

Mrs. Vorees, Justin's housekeeper, opened the front door for them. Her face was apple-cheeked and wreathed with smiles. She bustled around, taking the young ladies' cloaks, showing them into the drawing room where a fire leaped on the hearth of a huge fireplace and a table was already laid with cups and saucers. "You'll be wanting a good cup of hot tea after your cold drive," she told them. "It's a long drive from Albany."

"Oh, but we were driving Zeus so it didn't seem long!" Justin told her, trying without success to conceal his pride.

"You didn't have any trouble with the beast, then? That's a mercy, it would have been a pity to frighten the young ladies."

"Oh, no, Mr. Odets handles Zeus masterfully! So masterfully that I even drove a little way myself, and I have never driven a horse

before! Zeus knew his master was right there, so he behaved beautifully!" Phoebe exclaimed.

Mrs. Vorees looked doubtful, but Contrition was quick to agree with Phoebe, assuring the housekeeper that it was true.

The tea was welcome and delicious, but Contrition's attention was on the room more than on what she was drinking.

"Phoebe, isn't this a beautiful room? It's so large! Why, it's almost as large as your drawing room at home! And the furniture is lovely."

"It's very beautiful," Phoebe said. "Only it is very large! I think I prefer a smaller room, myself, cozier, you know, not so overwhelming."

Justin looked at her with new interest. "Isn't that a coincidence! I like the small parlor better, myself. I never use this room unless I'm entertaining. Come, I'll show you the parlor, and all of the other downstairs rooms."

The parlor was much smaller, and it was certainly cozy. Phoebe exclaimed with pleasure over the native stone fireplace, the comfortable, well-worn chairs, the hooked rugs on the floor, and the amount of sunlight that came in through the windows, making it brighter than the formal drawing room. There were books and periodicals on marble-topped tables, lamps with flowered glass globes for reading in the evening, and Mrs. Vorees had placed bright orange bittersweet in a copper pitcher on the mantleshelf. This was just the kind of a room Phoebe had wanted all of her life, a comfortable, cozy room where she could be herself and not feel overwhelmed by space and magnificence.

She sat down in one of the chairs by the hearth and folded her hands in her lap. "Now I only need some knitting and a cat," she said.

They burst out laughing when a calico cat came wandering into the room, sniffed first at Contrition's ankles and then at Phoebe's, and immediately made a graceful leap into Phoebe's lap and curled up, purring. Contrition thought that nothing better could have been contrived for a stage play. Somebody up there was on her side.

Phoebe was in ecstasy. Phoebe loved cats. There were no cats in the Haywood mansion; her mother disliked cats, saying they were

sly, dirty creatures, walking on tables and shedding their hair over carpets and furniture. Phoebe stroked the calico cat, and at last she dared to pick it up and lay her face against its warm, soft fur. The calico cat rubbed its face against her cheek and purred more loudly.

"He's beautiful! He's the most beautiful cat I ever saw!" Phoebe said, her voice catching.

"It's a she," Contrition told her. "Calicos are always shes. If they're hes, they're black and white, not calicos."

"She's going to have kittens soon," Justin said. "Would you like one, a calico, Miss Haywood?"

Tears sprang unbidden into Phoebe's eyes. "Mama wouldn't allow it," she said.

Justin looked stricken. Not to be allowed to have a kitten, a frisky, lovable, calico kitten? Justin's protective instincts flared up again, his hackles all but rose. This was a fine state of affairs when a sweet, timid little girl like Miss Haywood wasn't allowed to have a kitten! Come to think of it, Myron Coverdale probably wouldn't allow her to have a kitten either. Myron Coverdale didn't seem to Justin to be the type of man who liked animals as pets.

Mrs. Vorees came bustling into the room to ask Justin when he would like dinner to be served.

"Pumpkin, the very idea! Scat, shoo, get off the young lady's lap! I'm sorry, Miss Haywood. Pumpkin, come here, I'm taking you right back to the kitchen!"

Phoebe held Pumpkin closer. "It's all right, Mrs. Vorees. I like her. Please let her stay."

"She can stay, Mrs. Vorees. Miss Haywood likes her," Justin said. "I'm going to show Miss Haywood and Miss Verndon . . ." thank goodness, he'd remembered the new name in the nick of time . . . "the rest of the house and then show them the barns and outbuildings. Miss Haywood is particularly interested in the horses and cows and chickens. You can serve dinner at one o'clock. I hope you have something especially good on the stove."

"Chicken and dumplings and apple strudel," Mrs. Vorees said. "I didn't know what the young ladies would like, but everybody likes chicken and dumplings and apple strudel." Mrs. Vorees didn't act like a housekeeper, like a servant, at all; Mrs. Vorees was

cheerful and plump and friendly. And Justin . . . Mr. Odets, Phoebe corrected herself, biting at her lip, didn't even seem to notice that Mrs. Vorees wasn't acting as a servant should act; he acted as if she were a member of the family! What a wonderful thing it would be to live like this, in a house way out in the country, and not have to be frightened of the servants and get to sit in a pretty little parlor like this whenever she wanted to and have a cat like Pumpkin! Phoebe's eyes filled with tears again, she couldn't help it. She was happy for Dianna, she really was, but if something this wonderful could happen to Dianna, why couldn't it have happened to her? Dianna would never have to be frightened of Mr. Odets, or entertain crowds of overawing people, or anything Phoebe would have to do.

She gathered herself together. Dianna was her friend, her very dearest friend. She wasn't jealous of her, she wasn't! If Dianna and Mr. Odets were married, she'd be happy for both of them, it would be dreadful not to be happy for them. And maybe she'd get to visit them sometimes and sit in this little parlor and hold Pumpkin on her lap. She'd be very happy for Dianna and Mr. Odets, she would! Phoebe buried her face in Pumpkin's fur until she could control the tears in her eyes.

Pumpkin followed them, close at Phoebe's heels, while Justin showed them the rest of the house, and she followed them when they went outside to see the barns and stables and henyards.

"I'd like to see the chickens first," Phoebe said timidly. Chickens weren't so very frightening, they were small, and maybe it would give her time to work up her courage so that she wouldn't let Mr. Odets and Dianna see how much the cows and horses would frighten her, because they were big and she'd never been around any, except horses when her father or her grandfather or the coachman was driving them, and that wasn't the same thing at all. At least she wasn't afraid of Zeus. Mr. Odets wouldn't let Zeus hurt her, and she was a goose to be frightened because he wouldn't let the cows or the other horses hurt her either, only she was still a little afraid.

The chickens, a huge flock of them, were Plymouth Barred Rocks. They were big and plump and gray and white barred, and they laid big, brown eggs. Contrition was delighted, Contrition was enthralled. A whole, huge flock of Plymouth Barred Rocks! Contr-

tion moved among them, clucking, and when an enormous rooster with an enormous crest came pecking and biting at her with its wings spread, she didn't even flinch, she just shooed it away. How many eggs did they average, how many pounds did they average, for market? How many eggs did they send to market, how many young roosters?

"Just look at this beauty!" Contrition cried, picking up a plump gray hen and handing it to Phoebe. Phoebe's face paled. Then the hen was in her hands and its feathers were silky and it hardly struggled at all, and she made clucking noises at it the way Contrition had, and it clucked back at her, cocking its head and fixing her with a bright and inquiring eye.

"Oh, she's pretty! She's so pretty! I'm glad she's a hen, so she won't have to be sent to market!"

"Move slowly, Phoebe. Don't make any sudden motions. Talk softly to them," Contrition instructed her. "See, there's one sitting, I'll lay odds there's an egg under her that whoever gathered them this morning missed. Let's just see!" Contrition slipped her hand under the hen, so gently that the hen raised no objection at all, and withdrew it holding a warm, brown egg. "I'll bet we can persuade Mrs. Vorees to fry this for your dinner!"

"Oh, do you think she would? May I try to find one, may I please?"

"If whoever gathered them knew what she was doing, there won't be any more, but go ahead and see if you can get your hand under that one over there without disturbing her," Contrition told her.

Phoebe tried. Her hand, moving very slowly, slid under the hen, and her hand came out again, holding an egg. Phoebe's eyes were shining as though the egg were the golden egg that the goose had laid. Contrition's face was filled with disgust.

"Your henhussy needs a good talking to!" Contrition told Justin tartly. "Two eggs not gathered this morning! You'd better give her a piece of your mind, Mr. Odets! Such slackness is no way to run a farm!"

Justin, agreeing with her, discomfited because he'd been found lacking in his management, had never realized how bossy Contrition was, how much she nagged. To Contrition, an egg was an egg,

something to count up the profit on, but to Miss Haywood, with her eyes all big and shining, an egg she'd found herself was a miracle! Mrs. Vorees should certainly cook up both eggs for Miss Haywood to go with her midday meal. It would be a pleasure to see her pleasure!

Phoebe, as excited as a child, ran to the kitchen doorway with the two eggs cradled delicately in her hands. Justin, laughing, was at her heels, to instruct the astonished Mrs. Vorees that the eggs were to be prepared any way Miss Haywood wanted them. "She never saw a fresh-laid egg before," Justin explained.

"Ach, and is that the truth!" Mrs. Vorees' face was filled with sympathetic wonder. "Then of course she must have them for her dinner! Scrambled, fried, soft-boiled or hard-boiled, or coddled, Miss Haywood?"

"It's a shame to eat them at all, they're so pretty, all warm and brown!" Phoebe said. "But I can't very well take them home, Mama wouldn't be pleased if I asked for them to be cooked for me. Hard-boiled, please, Mrs. Vorees. That will keep them in their natural shape longer."

The time had come, they had to inspect the barns, with the horses and cows. It was too late in the fall for the cows to be out to pasture, the grass was dead and sere from two or three heavy frosts. Phoebe wished they could see the horses first because she wasn't as afraid of horses as she was of cows. She'd never been close to a cow before; she'd only seen them in pastures when she'd been driven through the countryside, with good stout fences between her and them.

"Look at that beauty! Look at all these beauties!" Contrition cried. There they stood, too many to count, all in their separate stanchions, their hindquarters toward the barn aisle. They were munching hay, their mangers were kept full, the barn was sparkling clean. "Glory, how I'd like to milk this one! How many gallons does she give, Mr. Odets? How much cream do you get to the gallon?"

The cow looked around at them. Her eyes were soft and brown and she had long eyelashes. Phoebe had never known that cows had long eyelashes. Why, she was pretty, her face was pretty and her

eyes were gentle. Phoebe dared to put her hand on the cow's side. The hide was rough, but it was clean and warm.

"She's letting me pet her! Dianna, can you really milk a cow?"

"Certain sure I can milk a cow. I was raised on a farm!" Contrition told her, laughing. "But I'm afraid you won't get to try your hand at it, Phoebe. We'll have started back before milking time."

Phoebe looked so disappointed that Justin, dismayed, thought she was going to cry. "It won't hurt to let her milk this one early," he said. "You can show her how, Miss Verndon."

"It doesn't do a cow any good to be milked ahead of time!" Contrition's voice was laced with disapproval. "Really, Mr. Odets, you should know better!"

"It's only one cow, and only the one time." Justin glared at her. "And it's my cow. If I say Miss Haywood can milk it, she can milk it." Contrition certainly was bossy! Not that he didn't love her dearly, but it would be nice if she were just a little softer and more gentle, like Miss Haywood.

"All right. Phoebe will milk the cow. Don't worry, Phoebe, Mr. Odets won't let her kick you."

"Kick?" Phoebe's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh, dear!" She looked at Justin, who was struggling not to show his own surprise and consternation. Did cows kick? Both of them looked at Contrition.

"Indeed they kick! If you don't know how to handle them they nearly always kick. Then the bucket goes over and the milk is lost."

Phoebe's face was pale. "I don't think I want to try. Please, Dianna, let's just forget the whole thing!"

"Nonsense." Contrition was pleased. Phoebe was frightened, and Justin would have to prove his masculinity by instructing and protecting her. It would be good for his ego, and what was good for his ego was good for Phoebe. Men liked to think that women looked up to them and thought they were brave and all-knowing. "Mr. Odets is right; it would be a shame for you not to try while you're here. He won't let the cow hurt you." She gathered up her skirt and started out of the cow barn. "And now I want to see the horses."

Contrition's heart swelled with what she admitted was downright envy when they saw the horses. The plow horses, the dray horses,

huge and sturdy animals in the pink of condition, their coats shining with health and care. And there was Senaca, the extra buggy horse, who was a beauty in his own right, coal black with a white star on his forehead and one white stocking. Not only a beauty but, Contrition judged just from looking at him, a good deal more tractable than Zeus.

"He's as gentle as a lamb, isn't he?" she asked, running her hands down his shoulders and flanks. "Two buggy horses! It's a pity that you can't drive two horses at once, Mr. Odets. I doubt that this one gets enough exercise, seeing that you prefer to drive Zeus."

"Well, we hardly need two buggy horses, but we had Senaca before I came into possession of Zeus. And it doesn't hurt to have an extra."

"I expect it doesn't, but all the same it's a pity that there's no way you can keep both horses exercised properly."

Justin looked at Contrition. He thought, uneasily, that she had something in mind. He puzzled over it, but then his face brightened. Of course! Contrition lived in Albany, without any kind of transportation, and here he was with two fine buggy horses and he only needed one. And there was the extra buggy, too, because when he'd won Zeus the buggy had come with him.

He managed to sound as if it were all his own idea.

"Miss Verndon, I'd be gratified if you'd accept the loan of one of the buggy horses for as long as you're in Albany. It would be doing me a kindness."

"Why, Mr. Odets! How kind of you, how extremely kind!" Contrition sounded suitably surprised, as if such a thought had never entered her mind. "I'll take very good care of Senaca, and it would be a pleasure to borrow him, if you're sure you can spare him! There's a stable at my place, right around in back."

"You shall have Zeus." If Justin was going to be generous, he was going to do it up in style! And besides, if Dianna, hang it, Contrition, took Zeus, Zeus would be taken in hand again and learn to behave himself. He'd been getting completely out of hand lately, without Dianna, Contrition, to make him behave. "No, I won't take no for an answer! It shall be Zeus, we'll say no more about it."

Contrition drew a deep breath. She was gratified that Justin had

taken the bait with so little trouble on her part. If she were going to carry out her plans to get Phoebe out from under her mother's and her grandfather's thumbs, she had to have a horse and buggy, and her finances didn't run to renting them from a livery stable. She turned to Phoebe, her face shining.

"Phoebe, isn't Mr. Odets generous, so kind and generous! Just think, now we'll be able to drive out whenever we take the notion! Isn't it going to be fun! We can just get in the buggy and go bowling around wherever we wish!"

Phoebe was overwhelmed. Her eyes were filled with worship as they fastened on Justin's face. "Mr. Odets, I never heard of anything so kind!"

Justin beamed, Justin's ego swelled. Certainly he was kind, he was always kind, he would have thought of it himself, given just a little more time!

"Ladies, now that that's settled, it's time to go back to the house. Mrs. Vorees will have our dinner ready." Gallantly, he offered each of them an arm, and he wished that his brothers and all of his friends were here to see him, Justin Odets, with the two prettiest girls in the county, and both of them thinking that he was a prince among men.

"Oh, no, this won't do at all!" Contrition exclaimed when she saw that places had been laid for them in the big dining room. "We want to eat in the kitchen!" She knew perfectly well that Phoebe had never got to eat in a kitchen in her life. "Phoebe, grab up some dishes and help me move them out there!"

Giggling, their faces rosy, the girls carried the plates and cups and saucers and flatware to the kitchen. Phoebe was in a dream; she felt as though a fairy godmother had waved her magic wand over her and transported her to this enchanted place where everyone was happy and there was nothing to be afraid of.

The kitchen was huge, a genuine country kitchen with a stone floor and heavy, exposed beams with pumpkins and onions and hams and herbs hanging from them, with a great fireplace with a fire leaping on the hearth and a rag rug in front of it, and two rocking chairs. Pumpkin lay curled up on the rag rug, purring and the aroma of chicken and dumplings simmering on the black cast-iron range was tantalizing.

Contrition had said it would be cozy, but to Phoebe it was like heaven. There was a red checked cloth on the round kitchen table, and Hans and Jacob and Peter, who took care of the stock and the fields, and Mrs. Vorees herself, all sat down with them. Hans and Jacob and Peter weren't a bit overwhelmed; they acted as if having guests eat in the kitchen with them were an everyday occurrence. They were a little shy, but they weren't intimidated, they were friendly and kind.

The chicken and dumplings were delicious, the two brown eggs were the finest food Phoebe had ever eaten, the apple strudel would have been almost an anticlimax, but it was so good. Contrition ate heartily, all the while questioning Hans and Jacob and Peter about the farm, so knowledgeable that she won them completely without even trying. Phoebe wished that her fairy godmother would wave her wand again and stop time in its tracks, so that she could stay here forever, in this lovely kitchen, with these people, and never, never have to go home and most especially never, never have to marry Mr. Myron Coverdale.

And although it seemed impossible, things got even better. When the meal was finished, Mrs. Vorees washed, and Contrition and Phoebe dried, and Justin was set to putting the dishes away on the shelves and in the cupboards. "Mrs. Vorees cooked the meal, it isn't fair that she should have to do all the cleaning up after it!" Contrition said. "Besides, Phoebe never got to dry dishes before, she'll like it."

Mrs. Vorees smile was filled with sadness to think that such a lovely girl had never got to dry dishes. Mrs. Vorees would have loved to have a chance to take Phoebe under her wing and teach her how to cook. There was a sweet girl for you, not as pretty as Dianna, but Mrs. Vorees would have hazarded a guess that she was easier to get along with than the other one. It was a pity, Mrs. Vorees thought, that Miss Haywood was engaged to another gentleman, because she was just the sort of wife Mrs. Vorees would like for Justin.

Then there was the cow to be milked, and by this time, Phoebe was so happy that she almost forgot to be frightened.

Daisy turned her head and looked at them as though she thought

they'd gone out of their minds when she was backed from her stanchion and a pail was set under her udder. Couldn't these people tell time?

"Gently but firmly, Phoebe. No, no, like this!" Contrition knelt and showed Phoebe again. Streams of milk hissed into the pail, foamy and steaming in the cool air. And then Daisy stamped, and Phoebe cried out in fright and scrambled off the stool and cowered behind Justin.

"You're perfectly all right." Justin was masterful. "Daisy, behave yourself!" He was proud of himself for his success in keeping any vestige of alarm from showing in his voice. One thing was certain. He was going to have Peter teach him how to milk a cow so he'd never be caught in such a predicament again, not knowing how or having any idea of how to make a cow behave.

Snorting, Contrition finished the milking herself, and she snorted again when she saw the amount of milk in the pail. "There, I told you! Nowhere near as much as there would have been if she'd been milked at the proper time!"

"I've already said that it doesn't matter in the least. And here's the cup." Justin dipped the cup into the bucket and then handed it to Phoebe. "Here you are, Miss Haywood. And you did milk part of it yourself!"

It didn't taste anywhere near as good as Phoebe had thought it would. It was too warm and tasted rather distastefully of cow. But she drank it, and she told herself that it was delicious, and she told Justin and Contrition that it was delicious, and Contrition laughed and said that milk fresh from the cow tasted awful, that it needed to be cooled in the springhouse before it tasted like milk should taste.

"We'd better be getting back. I don't want your mother getting angry because I kept you out too long," Contrition said. "I'll just hitch up Zeus and we'll be going."

"But Miss Verndon, that wouldn't be proper. I escorted you two ladies, and it's my place to escort you back again!" Justin said, shocked.

"Well, I'll drive Zeus back and you hitch up Senaca and drive Phoebe. You can follow right along behind me, and it'll be as proper as can be even if I am in another buggy."

It wasn't her fault if Zeus was feeling his oats and stepped out so smartly that she left Phoebe and Justin far behind and had to wait for them at the edge of town so that they could pull up in front of the Haywood mansion together, as proper as could be.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Phoebe," Contrition said. "Mr. Odets, thank you for lending me Zeus. Phoebe and I will drive out to visit you at Maple Lane again very soon."

Phoebe's breath caught. Such a wonderful occurrence had never entered her mind! But Mr. Odets was saying, "I'll hold you to that promise, Miss Verndon!"

And Phoebe wouldn't be married to Mr. Coverdale for months and months, and Dianna was staying in Albany until spring, and Phoebe would get to see Justin, Mr. Odets, again, maybe several times before that, and maybe it would be enough happiness to last her all the rest of her life.

24

It was a mercy that Leon had lived for such a long time with the Mazzinis at the Palazzo Mazzini that he could speak Italian with enough fluency to make himself understood, or he and Henry would have had little chance of making good their escape.

But Henry wasn't satisfied with that. He had a very good idea that the brothers and cousins Mazzini would be in hot pursuit as soon as their disappearance was discovered, and with his expertise at stage makeup, he insisted on altering their appearance so that even if all six of the young Mazzinis were to come upon them, they would have a good chance of not being recognized.

"Bleach my hair? Are you daft?" Leon demanded as they

approached the first town of any size. "I'd look like an idiot with blond hair, Henry!"

"Would you rather look like an idiot with blond hair, or spend the rest of your life listening to Rosalina bray?" Henry's voice dripped acid. His patience, sorely tried for all these weeks in Italy, was fraying at the edges and threatening to give way at any moment.

Here he was, God knew where in the middle of what was supposed to be sunny Italy, which wasn't sunny at all but downright cold and miserable, with rain trickling down his collar, and sometimes sleet, his fingers and toes numb, bouncing around on a nag that had a spine-jolting trot. And somewhere in the state of New York across the Atlantic Ocean, Contrition was either already married to Justin Odets or preparing to marry him in the near future, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it because he was in Italy, and it was all Leon's fault, and there were times when he could have cheerfully throttled his cousin, even if they had sworn eternal allegiance to each other when they'd been too young to know any better.

Leon was an idiot. Leon was a scoundrel. Leon was without morals or common sense or any of the attributes that make a man worth having as a friend, much less a cousin. And now, to cap it all, Leon was protesting about a matter as simple as bleaching his hair in order to save both their lives.

"They won't catch us. We got away clean, thanks to you and that formidable brainpower of yours. You were magnificent, Henry! Anyone who doesn't know you as well as I do would have sworn that you were an empty-headed profligate without a sensible thought in his head, wanting nothing but plenty of wine, women, and song! You fooled them completely. As a matter of fact, you came within an inch of fooling me! There were moments when I thought that getting away from Schenectady and the influence of our families, you'd discovered that life can be more pleasure than duty, and you'd decided that it was time you had some of the pleasure." Leon gave Henry a searching look and added doubtfully, "And I'm not sure that I don't prefer you in the second role."

"You're going to bleach your hair." Henry's voice was firm. "You're going to write out the words I'll need for the first apothecary we can find, and I'll deliver it to the shop, a servant carrying an order from

his master. Or mistress, which would be more appropriate. From now on, *master*, you are a fair-haired young gentleman of moderate means, a Frenchman, not an American, and I hope to heaven that you picked up enough French while you were busy trying to seduce every beautiful Frenchwoman you came into contact with to carry it off."

"I can find my way around in French. I know Paris like the palm of my hand," Leon told him, wounded. "I can carry it off, I just don't see why it's necessary."

"And I hope that it won't be necessary, but I'm not about to take the chance that it won't. Prince Alberico Mazzino is mightily determined to have you for his son-in-law, and his sons are just as determined to have you for a brother-in-law, and his nephews are just as determined to have you for a well-heeled, generous kinsman. You donkey, of all the asinine behavior, to let yourself get involved with an empty-headed featherbrain like Rosalina, with her avaricious family that's willing to resort to kidnapping to transfer your fortune from your pockets to theirs! A ten-year-old boy would have known better, but all you could see was how beautiful Rosalina was and conspire to get her into your bed!"

"I hadn't heard her laugh," Leon defended himself. "They must have pounded it into her that she mustn't laugh until she had me good and hooked. And I never did get her into bed. It didn't get as far as that. I was only caught with her in the garden, going through the preliminaries of getting her into bed."

"Speaking of getting a woman into bed, I've got to get myself to a doctor, as well as an apothecary." Henry's voice was grim. "If I've picked up some obnoxious disease because of you, I swear I'll make you pay for it as long as you live. If I let you live!"

"Angela's clean," Leon protested. "And so are the other girls you got to enjoy while I was trapped at the Palazzo, dancing attendance on Rosalina, you lucky dog!"

"We hope that Angela isn't diseased, or the other two I came into contact with, but we can't be sure of it. Maybe I'll end up a gibbering idiot with running sores, rotting away like Louis the Fourteenth and Henry the Eighth!"

"Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it! I've seen those girls; you'd have to have ice water in your veins not to have enjoyed it! It's probably the only chance in your life you ever had to enjoy yourself, and you played your part so well that only an idiot would imagine that you hated every minute of it! Any man I know would have given his eyeteeth to be in your shoes, that far away from home where he could let himself go and have all the fun he wanted without any chance of being caught out! And there I was, trapped at the palazzo, going through a living death!"

"It's too bad it wasn't a dying death if this is the way you're going to act! If I didn't have to get you back to America to refute the charges that I murdered Flora Baldwin, I swear I'd have left you at the palazzo to stew in your own juices!"

The two cousins glared at each other, all traces of their boyhood camaraderie vanished. Leon couldn't see that he'd done anything wrong; he'd simply had bad luck. And Henry was seething because of all this lost time, as well as the considerable danger they were still in, and because Contrition was always in his mind, and thinking of her married to Justin was like wearing a hair shirt, giving him no peace. If they couldn't get out of this damnable country soon, and back in America where they belonged, he'd go stark, raving mad.

It was Leon who nearly went stark, raving mad during the process of bleaching his hair. Not daring to do it at a hotel or an inn because the change would have been remarked on, he had to accomplish it out of doors, in the countryside, on a cold, overcast day with a wind that cut through to the bone. The chemicals dripped in Leon's face and got in his eyes because he refused to hold his head still, and he yelped and cursed and threatened to kill Henry if his hair fell out at the roots, which he was convinced it would do.

"That's a good idea." Henry grinned, without mirth. "Being bald would be a much better disguise than merely changing the color of your hair."

"Damn you, that stings! And it stinks!" Leon raged. "I'm sick, damnit, I'm going to puke! What the devil is in that stuff, anyway?"

"I'm not sure," Henry told him. "I believe that cow urine makes

up a good part of it. That's what ladies in the Middle Ages used to lighten their hair."

"Ohmigod!" Leon moaned. "Get out of my way, now I know I'm going to puke."

"Not now. Hold still, blast you! We're missing some hair back here. No, you can't wash it off yet, it's got to set for a good while or it won't work."

Holding his nose, Leon sat still making gagging sounds in his throat, and he made a solemn vow that he'd get even with Henry if it took him all the rest of his life. Even if he didn't die of nausea, or his hair didn't all fall out, he'd present such a ludicrous picture after Henry was through with him that he'd be ruined with all the ladies, they'd laugh themselves into fits if he as much as approached them with any hint of a flirtation.

It didn't work as well as Henry had hoped it would, in any case. On Henry it worked, because his hair was brown, and lightening it only a shade or two made a big difference in his appearance. But Leon's hair was nearly black, and the result was that instead of being a blonde when Henry finally let him wash the odoriferous mess out of his hair, it was more nearly red than a lighter brown. And the color wasn't even, it was streaked. Looking at his cousin, Henry doubled over with laughter.

"You'd make a remarkable clown behind the footlights!" Henry howled. "Anton would be tickled to get ahold of you to play a part in *A Midsummer Night's Dream!* What a fine sprite you'd make, all pied like that!"

"A redhead Frenchman! A pied redhead! Nobody's going to believe it!" Leon raged. "Stop that confounded laughing, damnit! Is it really that bad?"

Actually, once his hair had dried and Henry had used his considerable skill in trimming and styling it, Leon's hair gave him a rakish look, not without its own peculiar charm, but Henry wouldn't give his cousin the satisfaction of telling him so. Let Leon suffer, thinking that he was ruined with the ladies. For Leon, that would be a fate worse than death.

They pushed on, taking lodgings wherever they could find them. Cheap lodgings; coarse, cheap food. Pasta and more pasta and hard

cheese and sausage reeking of garlic and cheap, sour wine. They were afraid to drink the water after first Henry and then Leon came down with severe cramps and diarrhea after having drunk the water in one hamlet where they spent a night.

Leon raged over Henry's parsimoniousness. To Leon, money was to spend, indulging himself with the best of everything. Leon saw no reason why they shouldn't seek out a town large enough to boast a bank capable of honoring a draft on his funds so that they could travel as gentlemen of means.

Henry, on the other hand, knew the necessity of keeping as low a profile as possible. The Mazzinis weren't stupid; they might find a way to check banks, get a good idea of where Leon and Henry had been in the near past, and be hot on their trail. And what money Leon had with him, which wasn't all that much because of the Mazzinis, had to be conserved until they could reach a place where it would be safe to have a draft honored, well out of the reach of the pursuing Mazzinis.

Their enmity, with both of them at each other's throats, lasted until they came face to face with Piero in a sizable village as they worked their way north. Piero was standing by the public fountain, his eyes narrow, his lean face turning this way and that as he studied every man who came within his sight. Piero, even as Henry and Leon froze in their tracks, stopped a man and questioned him, demanding to know if two men answering their description had passed through the village.

"If you hadn't made us waste all that time by bleaching our hair, we'd have been well ahead of him!" Leon hissed.

"Speak French, damnit!" Henry hissed back. "No, don't turn around and go the other way, he's seen us and it would rouse his suspicion. Walk straight ahead and pass him by." Henry allowed his shoulders to take on a slight slump, his gait became that of an older man, and he assumed a hangdog expression. "Berate me!" he whispered without moving his lips. "I'm your servant and you're angry with me about something! And do it in French!"

Leon began shouting rapid-fire imprecations at Henry, his eyes spitting fire. He called Henry a pig and a dolt and a piece of rotting carrion, among other less flattering things. It was just as well that

Henry couldn't understand him because Leon meant every word he was saying, his bile at Henry's forcing him into this penurious way of living and into ruining his appearance all rushing out in a spate of malice that left no doubt as to his anger, even though the words themselves were incomprehensible.

Henry's shoulders drooped even further; he looked both chagrined and alarmed. He didn't open his mouth to defend himself. He exuded the impression that he didn't dare. They walked directly past Piero, who made to stop them to question them and then shrugged as he realized that he couldn't understand their language.

When they were well-past Piero and around one of the twisting corners, Leon's breath came out in a whoosh. "That was close!"

Henry was peering back around the corner to make sure that Piero hadn't had second thoughts about them. "Closer than you think," he said grimly. "Look there."

Leon looked, and there was Francesco, cutting across the cobbled street to meet Piero. Two of them and both armed, and this was Italy, and the cousins didn't doubt for a moment that if Piero and Francesco were to accost them, no hand would be raised to come to their aid, foreigners that they were and with the story Piero and Francesco would tell them of a man fleeing his obligations to marry a girl of distinguished family whom Leon had dishonored.

They kept to a cheap, rented room the rest of the day, not even daring to venture out to purchase food. It was nearly midnight before they dared to leave, retrieving their horses from a shabby livery stable where they had housed them and thrusting out into the dark and forbidding countryside as fast as they dared to make their horses go.

"They may still get on our trail," Henry panted. "If they question the liveryman, they'll find out that two men left in the middle of the night and they'll be after us. Kick that nag up, damn it! We may have only a few hours head start, again!"

They pushed on through the night, cold, hungry, every inch of them miserable and filled with apprehension. It began to rain an hour before dawn, and the road underneath them turned soggy. Leon cursed a blue streak. Henry saved his strength for riding and enduring. Justin Odets, he thought, was warm and dry and comfort-

able, his stomach was filled, and he didn't have a care in the world. Justin Odets, he thought, might very well be taking a meal at this very moment, with his wife, his wife Contrition Reeves, and neither of them knew nor would have cared in the least where he was now and what he was suffering, and it was all Leon's fault.

And even when, and if, they managed to get out of this mess and out of Italy, there was still the murder charge to be cleared up, and that was Leon's fault, too, because if it hadn't been for Leon, he wouldn't have been in New York City and met the beauteous Flora Baldwin and drunk so much that he'd fallen unconscious when he'd started to escort her home and found himself charged with her murder.

They pushed on. They rode all day, every day, from dawn until dark, always making their way northward up the west coast of Italy, and it became colder as they rode, and they became thinner and more tired, and their tempers became more fierce. Always cold, sometimes wet, often hungry, they pushed on at the fastest speed possible because Henry forced Leon to keep going, even when Leon swore that some day, when they were safe, he'd kill Henry for it.

"They've given up long ago! They'd never have followed us this far! There's no reason to kill ourselves. What the devil's your hurry, anyway?"

"You know what my hurry is, I've told you often enough!" Henry grated. "Once we're out of Italy, your life will be a bed of roses again, but I still have mine to straighten out! Contrition and that murder charge, and I'll never forgive you, Leon, I swear I won't!"

"It won't matter if we get to Rome a few days later. I'm tired, damn it! We're almost there, and then we'll be in civilization! Wait till you see Rome, Henry! The Colosseum, and Catacombs, the Arch of Constantine, Saint Peter's and the Sistine Chapel! The fountains, the statues! The restaurants, the Baths of Diocletian, the Piazza Novona! And the women!" Leon stopped to sigh, rolling his eyes heavenward. "Rome has the most beautiful women in the world!"

"I'm not going to Rome to sightsee or to chase women! I'm going to Rome so I can get the hell out of Italy!" Henry raved at him.

"You'll have to postpone your womanizing until we're back in the United States!"

"Not take the opportunity to see Rome, when it might be the only chance you'll have in your life? Now I know you're insane!" Leon was aghast.

"All we're going to do is latch onto some of your riches, and arrange to get out of it and on the first ship!" Henry told him flatly. "Now shut up and ride!"

"I never did get to see Venice," Leon said, his voice filled with regret. "I was going to see Venice. I had every intention of seeing Venice."

"Venice, unless geography has changed since I studied it when I was a boy, is on the other side of Italy, north." Henry's voice was as caustic as Leon's was regretful. "We are not going to Venice."

"All right, we're not going to Venice if you're in such an all-fired hurry." Then Leon's face brightened. "But we can stop off in Pisa. And then there's Genoa, and we have to stop off there! Nobody in his right mind would miss spending some time in Genoa at this time of the year. It's warm and sunny, balmy, smothered with flowers even in the middle of the winter. We really ought to go to Florence, it's a pity for you to miss all those Renaissance buildings, Florence of the Medici, all that history!" He looked at Henry doubtfully and sighed. "Not Florence. But Genoa, certainly. Your Contrition is married to Justin by now, and the murder charge will wait, so what's your stupid hurry?"

"We're going home!" Henry shouted at him, so enraged by Leon's irresponsibility that his eyes blurred with anger and he failed to see the pothole in the road that brought him to disaster as his tired horse, none too smart to begin with, stepped in it. The horse fell and Henry went down with it. The horse stumbled to its feet, unhurt, but when Henry, cursing, tried to scramble to his feet, he found that he couldn't because his leg was broken.

"Is your leg broken?" Leon asked.

"Of course not. I always wear it this way, bent between my ankle and my knee. Of course it's broken, you idiot!" Henry roared.

"What the devil are we going to do?"

"You . . ." Henry said through clenched teeth, ". . . are going to

drag me out of this . . ." the words that came out of Henry's mouth shocked Leon to the core ". . . road and under a tree, preferably one that will keep a little of this . . ." more words that shocked Leon to the core ". . . rain off me." It had begun to rain, adding insult to injury, and the clouds, dark and ominous, that hung almost to the ground, and the bitter cold of the wind that had sprung up, gave every indication that the rain would soon turn to sleet. "And then you're going to ride on and find some kind of a conveyance that will get me to some place where I can have this leg splinted. Any conveyance will do, as long as it has four wheels, none of them in danger of falling off. Now get the hell moving and do it!"

Leon, his face almost as pale as Henry's, complied. He had no choice but to comply. There was no way that he could set Henry's leg himself, he didn't know how, and besides, he didn't have any splints or bandages; all they had were their small bundles strapped to their saddles, and now they had only one bundle because Henry's horse, tired of being pushed unreasonably through cold and rain and mud, had taken the opportunity to run off and disappear in the gathering murk. gingerly, Leon eased his hands under Henry's shoulders and started dragging him. Henry cursed some more.

They achieved the tree that Leon had decided on, but its limbs were bare and it did no more to keep the rain off Henry than an umbrella that had lost its covering and was no more than bare ribs. Henry winced as the icy rain pelted his face and saturated his clothing.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right?" Leon asked.

"Certainly I'm going to be all right. I can scarcely go wandering off in search of wine and women and get myself lost or in other trouble," Henry said, his words and tone so sarcastic that they got through even to Leon, who echoed his wince.

"Well, I'll be as fast as I can. Try to rest, Henry. I'll be back."

"You'd better be or I'll track you to the ends of the earth for the sole satisfaction of wringing your neck," Henry told him, his voice, this time, so emotionless that it carried twice the impact of the threat of the words themselves.

Leon took off his coat and spread it over Henry. "It won't help much but it's better than nothing." In his shirtsleeves, he remounted

his own beast and rode away through the rain that was already turning to sleet just as it had promised. Watching his cousin disappear, Henry felt more alone than he'd ever felt in his life. To counteract the loneliness, he cursed some more, and he finally muttered, "Leon's a scoundrel, a rascal, a wastrel, a lecherous womanizer, and a blithering moron, but he left me his coat." He wouldn't admit that the extra moisture he felt on his face was from tears that gathered in his eyes. "Damn him anyway, he didn't have to go and leave me his coat, he'll be soaked!"

With the sky so black that the afternoon had taken on the aspects of night, it was hard to tell how the day was progressing. Henry knew that what seemed like an hour was probably only ten or fifteen minutes. It didn't seem worth while to take his watch out of his pocket to check the time, it would only get wet and stop. It was probably already wet and stopped.

His watch was wet, and it had stopped. Cursing some more, Henry managed to put it back in his pocket. Maybe a watchmaker would be able to remove the rust from its wheels and springs and repair it, if he ever needed a watch again, which at the moment seemed doubtful.

Lying there, shaking with cold and in considerable pain now that the first shock of his broken leg had worn off, he wondered if there were wolves in Italy, or lions, or other wild beasts that would come out at dark searching for easy prey. There could hardly be any easier prey than he was, with his leg broken and not as much as a knife on him, let alone a gun. He should have thought to purchase arms somewhere along the way, but he'd never carried arms; there'd been no need for carrying arms in Schenectady, and he didn't want to kill anyone, he only wanted to get out of Italy.

Thinking about wolves and lions made him think of other predators, the two-legged kind. What about bandits? If bandits were to come across him, helpless as he was, they'd as likely as not cut his throat after emptying his pockets. At least his watch was ruined; they wouldn't get any good out of that. Except they could sell it for the gold case, worse luck. Henry didn't want them to get any good out of anything they took from him, he wasn't in the mood to be charitable.

He knew that it was night now because there was no light at all. The clouds and the sleet-laced rain made his surroundings as black as the inside of a cave. And there was a noise, it was definitely a noise, a cracking, shuffling noise, and it was coming nearer, and it wasn't the sound of wagon wheels that would herald his rescue. Henry stiffened, cold sweat mingling with the cold rain and sleet. Yes, it was definitely an animal, and it was almost upon him.

He could see it now, a vague outline, grayish in this lack of light. It was huge. Henry hadn't known that lions grew that big. He groped all around him, searching for a fallen limb, a stick, anything. But there wasn't even a stone, much less a good-sized rock.

It was coming closer, it was upon him! Henry opened his mouth to shout, he waved his arms, he prepared for death here in this freezing rain, lying in the dark and the mud under a leafless tree in Italy, and he hoped that Leon would go to heaven when he died because he didn't want to have to chase him all the way down into hell to get even with him for having caused his death here in Italy in the middle of nowhere, and for a fleeting moment he almost wished that he'd be plunged directly into hell when the beast tore his throat out because hell would at least be warm.

There was a blast of hot air in his face, a nuzzling at his face, and a shrill, plaintive whinny.

Henry's arms continued waving, his shouts still issued from his throat, even as he began to laugh. His laughter was wild, filled with hysteria. He laughed until he almost strangled. And his errant horse, which had found its way back to him after having decided that misery loves company, whinnied again and continued to nose him.

Henry's laughter stopped abruptly. It was funny, all right. He had to admit that it was funny, being terrified of his own horse. But he couldn't ride the horse, and there was no sight nor sound of Leon, and he was as badly off as he'd been before the horse had come back.

Time dragged. Henry was so miserable, even with the company of another creature made of flesh and blood, that his body insisted that his mind escape by falling asleep.

He started awake, his body going rigid. There'd been another sound. Another animal? A wolf this time? Or a lion? Don't be an

ass, there weren't any lions in Italy. Or were there? Hadn't there been, in Biblical times? At the moment Henry was too confused from cold and pain to remember.

The sound came again, a creaking, discordant to the ear. Wheels, creaking wooden wheels!

And there was a cart, a rude farmcart, and two voices speaking in Italian, and one of the voices was Leon's.

"Henry, are you still here?"

"Where the devil do you think I'd be? Of course I'm still here!"

Leon worked a board, much too large, under his broken leg, and he worked cords around it to hold the leg immobile. Henry gritted his teeth and managed not to scream. He was lifted, and there was a strong odor of garlic as the farmer leaned over to take his shoulders while Leon managed his legs. He was lowered into the bed of the cart onto a thick padding of straw. The straw was wet. Henry was wet. Henry was miserable. And the cart horse plodded slowly, agonizingly slowly, through the rain and the sleet and the mud, and if the cart didn't get bogged down it would be a miracle.

Henry cursed some more and wished that Contrition were here. If Contrition were driving, the cart wouldn't get bogged down. But Contrition was at Maple Lane with Justin; Contrition was Mrs. Justin Odets, unless her stubbornness had abated enough to let her take heed of the message Henry had left her through Sam Smith, and he didn't have any real conviction that Contrition's stubbornness had abated enough to let her pay any heed. The wagon jolted over a rut and Henry wanted to scream. He cursed Leon instead.

Sitting in the straw beside him, his arm around Henry's shoulders trying to ease the jolts, Leon was cheerful.

"We're not far from Rome; we're a lot closer than we thought we were. We'll stay at Giovani's farm tonight, and tomorrow I'll ride on to Rome and fetch a doctor to set your leg properly and hire a carriage or a wagon to take you on into Rome. It isn't much of a farm, it's just a small place, but Giovani's wife will make us up pallets in the kitchen. I hope you don't mind chickens and goats in the kitchen."

"Shut up," Henry said.

"Everything's all right now. We'll be at the farm soon."

Soon, Henry thought sourly, depended on how long you thought soon was. Leon had been gone for a long time, and even considering that he'd had to come all the way back again, in this cart soon was a long time.

He fainted when he was lifted from the cart and carried into the farmhouse. When he came around, a young girl was holding a cup of wine to his lips. The wine was sour and strong. The girl was pretty, and there was another girl just as pretty hovering over her sister's shoulder holding a bowl of soup.

"So you've decided to join us," Leon said, delighted. "This is Elena, and her sister is Gina. Aren't they beautiful?"

"I hate garlic," Henry said. "I never want to taste or smell garlic again. I used to like garlic, but enough is enough. Tell Gina to take the soup away."

Leon took the bowl and ate the soup himself. Garlic was delicious, the soup was delicious, and Elena and Gina were beautiful. Young and ripe and smiling, and if they had to be stranded in this farmhouse until he could fetch a doctor to mend Henry's leg, wasn't it delightful that Giovani Vernetti had two such lovely daughters?

Henry would have preferred to forget the setting of his leg by the doctor who spoke no English but only smiled at him with what Henry was convinced was a sadistic smile. But the leg was set now, and Henry had come around again after fainting again. Elena was wiping his forehead with a cold, wet cloth, and he flinched away from it because even if he was hot, even if he was burning up, he didn't want anything cold anywhere near him.

"Let's get out of here. Did you bring a carriage or a wagon?" Henry said.

Gina was flirting with Leon, brushing his hair back from his forehead, her fingertips lingering and teasing. Leon was grinning like an idiot. "It's still raining. We'll wait a day or two, until it clears up and you're stronger."

"We're going now! You have to arrange passage on the first ship you can find."

Leon protested. The doctor protested. Elena and Gina protested, looking at Leon as if they wanted to eat him for dessert. Giovani and

his work-worn wife protested, counting lira in their minds and dreaming of their beautiful daughters making matches with these two rich Americans. But they went to Rome. Gina and Elena cried, Giovani and Rosa looked crestfallen, Leon sulked, but they went anyway.

The lodgings Leon procured for them in Rome were not lavish but they were comfortable. Henry was gratified when the woman Leon found to look after them turned out to be middle-aged and fat. The woman cooked their meals and Henry ate them with a poor appetite. He still hated garlic, and he had come to despise the sight of pasta, and he couldn't stomach the sour red wine and the coffee was so strong a spoon would stand upright in it. He never wanted to see another olive again. Leon dined out, and Henry suspected, gritting his teeth, that he didn't dine alone.

Henry lay in his feather bed and shivered. Then he burned, and then he shivered again. The doctor came. Henry had caught a chill, a bad chill, Henry was sick. It was out of the question for him to attempt a sea voyage until he was better.

Henry gritted his teeth and got better. Not much better, but enough better so that he could shout and threaten. Still Leon dug in his heels.

Her name was Sabrina, and she had auburn hair and blue eyes and she was beautiful. Leon brought her to see Henry, and Henry closed his eyes and despaired that he would ever be able to shout loud enough to move Leon out of Rome until he felt it expedient to break off this new romance before Sabrina got the idea that it might end in marriage. Henry cursed and wished that Leon would be struck blind so that he couldn't tell a beautiful girl from an ugly one, or that he'd be struck impotent, or that he'd break one of his own legs.

When two weeks had passed and Henry was quite a good deal better, Leon returned home one evening, his face pale. "I saw Braccio and Francesco. They're here in Rome, hunting for us."

"Then get us to hell out of Rome!" Henry shouted.

The ship wasn't much of a ship. It was more like an oversized boat. It was slow and it wallowed and Henry was convinced that it leaked, and the accommodations were foul because it wasn't a passen-

ger ship at all, it was a fishing boat, all Leon could find to get them out of Rome before Braccio and Francesco found them. It was a coastal vessel, working its way up the west side of Italy, its owner made wealthy beyond imagination by Leon's determination to hire it to make their escape.

It was cold. It rained. And Henry had a relapse. He hadn't been well enough to attempt the voyage in the first place. Only the advent of Braccio and Francesco showing up in Rome had driven them to procure such a foul vessel.

Leon passed up Genoa. Genoa was still in Italy. It hurt him to pass it up, but southern France was just as good. Southern France, lush with trees and flowers and villas and pensions and the broad reaches of the incomparable Mediterranean. And Henry couldn't shout him into not stopping here, because Henry was raving in delirium. Henry was carried off the boat on a litter, completely out of it, and Leon was so afraid that he was going to die that he could hardly look forward to their stay in this paradise on earth.

The French doctor shook his head and refused to make any prognosis. Americans were madmen, the physician said, or else they would never attempted the voyage with Mr. Cunningham so ill. Their folly might well end in Mr. Cunningham's death. Leon, to his credit, mourned more over his cousin's impending death than he did about feeling constrained to remain with him at his bedside day after day while dozens of beautiful women were within his reach only for the asking.

"How long will it be before we know?" Leon asked the physician.

No shrug is more expressive than a French shrug.

25

"I have the use of a horse and buggy," Contrition told Jewel the morning after she and Phoebe had visited Maple Lane. "Justin lent me Zeus for as long as I need him, isn't that wonderful?"

"Zeus?" Even in her self-imposed isolation, Jewel had heard of Zeus. She could scarcely have helped but hear of him, as her own maid had an ear for any bits of news and gossip, and Jewel had trained her to pass on such information so that she wouldn't be bored to death by not knowing what was going on. "The trotter Justin won in a card game? I hear that he's a great deal of horse; whatever possessed Justin to lend him to you? You'll never be able to handle him!"

Contrition grinned at her grandmother. "Just wait and see," she said. "I'm taking you and Phoebe out for a ride this afternoon."

Jewel, who was seldom surprised by anything, was taken by surprise. "Contrition, I'm a cripple, an invalid! I can't possibly go out buggy riding with you!"

"You're a fraud. You're perfectly capable of going for a buggy ride. And you have to come because your daughter-in-law and your husband probably won't let Phoebe go unless you do, two girls without a proper chaperone. Just wait till you see Zeus! He's a beauty, you'll love him! You know you want to go, and even if you didn't you'd do it for Phoebe."

"It'll set this house on its ear if I do," Jewel said. And then she grinned back at her granddaughter. "It'll set all of Albany on its ear! It'll be worth it, just to see people's face when they see me abroad after all these years!"

"And it's about time, too," Contrition said. "You've been a turtle

hiding in its shell for long enough! You can be carried downstairs and lifted into the buggy. Actually, it wouldn't hurt to let people know that you can walk a little. It would give Phoebe's mother something to think about, anyway, and your husband. They might be a little shaken up wondering what you'll spring on them next."

Jewel's smile broadened. "John! Yes, I'd like to see his face when he realizes that I can walk, that I don't have to stay cooped up out of his sight unless I choose to! He and Betty have had everything their own way for long enough, with me safely out of the way where I can't cause any embarrassment or trouble to them. You're right, Contrition. I should love to go buggy riding with you this afternoon!"

Neither John Haywood nor Contrition's father were at home that afternoon when, sharply at two o'clock, Contrition pulled Zeus up in front of the Haywood mansion. But Elizabeth Haywood was, and when Contrition had jumped out of the buggy and put out the weight that would keep Zeus from straying and was admitted through the front door, her eyes danced like gleeful imps to hear the commotion that was taking place.

Jewel was not only downstairs but dressed warmly in a cape and a bonnet and gloves, all of them years out of style but still elegant. Jewel was sitting regally in a straight-backed chair in the drawing room, occupying it as though it were a throne.

"I can't hear of such a thing! It's quite out of the question! Mother Haywood, you haven't been downstairs for years, much less out of the house, and for you to go out alone, without even a coachman to drive you! No, I cannot permit it!"

"Betty, allow me to remind you that as long as my husband is alive, I am the mistress of this house and it is not in your power to permit or not to permit me to do anything I choose. And I choose to go buggy riding this afternoon, in the company of my granddaughter and Miss Verndon. And here's Miss Verndon, as punctual as I knew she'd be, and Phoebe and I are ready. Phoebe, run and tell Oswald to come and help me down the front steps and into the buggy. Scat, girl, I don't relish being kept waiting!"

Phoebe, with a fearful look at her mother, scuttled. "I'm sure I don't know what my father-in-law will say about this!" Elizabeth Haywood pulled herself up to her full height, her heavy face red

with anger. "Although I have a very good idea that he will not approve and that there will be the severest of repercussions when he learns of it!"

"Let him repercuess all he wants to," Jewel said placidly. "It'll be too late for him to stop me then because the deed will be done. And he won't stop me in the future, either, so don't pin your hopes on that! The moth is coming out of its cocoon!"

"The butterfly, Mrs. Haywood, not a moth, a butterfly!" Contrition clapped her hands with delight. "And now we're going to flit!"

"Miss Verndon, I hold you responsible for this! Such a notion never would have entered my mother-in-law's head if you hadn't put it there! It certainly wouldn't have entered my daughter's head!"

"But there's nothing improper about it." Contrition made her voice as sweet and deferent as she could manage, and that was very sweet and deferent indeed, owing to all the coaching she'd had from the Olympians. "Seeing that I have the good fortune of having a fine trotter and a buggy at my disposal, it would be a shame not to take advantage of it to persuade Mrs. Haywood out into the fresh air and let her enjoy a ride through Albany. I am a great believer in the salubrious effect of fresh air, Mrs. Haywood. It brings color to the cheeks and makes the blood run fast, promoting good health, and you certainly approve anything that will improve your mother-in-law's health."

Betty Haywood was struck dumb. What could she say, faced with such logic right out of the blue and without sufficient time to gather her defenses?

Jewel, grasping both arms of the straight-backed chair, rose to her feet. Beside her daughter-in-law, she was diminutive but not overshadowed. Every inch of her five feet and one half of an inch was held with queenly bearing. "Young ladies, if you would be so kind," she said.

With Contrition on one side of her and Phoebe on the other, giving her as much support as she needed, Jewel walked out of the drawing room and traversed the entrance hall, where Oswald, the Haywood's all-around handyman, waited just outside the front door to assist her down the steps and lift her into the buggy. Oswald's face, as well trained as he was, registered pure astonishment. Beside

Oswald, Martin, the Haywoods' butler, who was much too slight to be of such assistance himself, stood with his face filled with not only astonishment but consternation and as much disapproval as Elizabeth Haywood herself had registered. Martin was not looking forward to the master's reaction when he learned of this outing, he wasn't looking forward to it at all.

"Martin, your mouth is hanging open. It isn't at all attractive. Be kind enough to close it," Jewel said. "And get on with it, Oswald! I'm not made of glass. Thank you. You are not only strong, but you are gentle. I'll commend you to my husband this evening."

"Thank you, Mrs. Haywood," Oswald stammered. His look at Contrition was doubtful. "Are you sure that Miss Verndon can handle this horse? If you'd like to go out for a ride, you could have the carriage brought around and your own coachman drive you."

"I do not wish to go for a drive in the carriage. I wish to go for a buggy ride. And Miss Verndon is quite capable of handling Zeus; she told me so herself." And she'd better be, Jewel said to herself, or I'll skin her alive. Being crippled once was bad enough; I have no desire to become crippled all over again under an overturned buggy. Not just when things are getting interesting, with me not only on my feet, after a fashion, but out of the house, and Contrition here to help me fight my husband and my daughter-in-law to keep Phoebe from ruining her life by marrying Myron Coverdale! Something tells me that it's going to be quite a battle, and I wouldn't miss it for the world.

With Jewel in the middle, Contrition picked up the ribbons. Zeus's head went up, his neck arched, and he stepped out. They bowled down the street, with Zeus trotting as smartly as only he could trot, with Jewel's back as straight as a ramrod and a flush of excitement in her cheeks, with Phoebe's eyes shining at this unheard-of adventure, going out with Contrition and her grandmother without her mother or her father or her grandfather along! Why, she'd even dare laugh aloud for the pure joy of it if she wanted to! To prove her point, she laughed.

"Oh, Grandmother, isn't this wonderful! Just see how Dianna can handle Zeus! Isn't he the most beautiful trotter you ever saw?"

"He is," Jewel said. Jewel quivered, her blood racing to her fingertips. "Dianna, give me those ribbons!"

Phoebe gasped. "Grandmother! You mustn't, you aren't well, you aren't strong enough!"

"Hush up and watch someone drive who knows how to drive!" Jewel said. Contrition relinquished the ribbons without a second's hesitation. She had faith in Jewel.

Zeus's ears pricked up, and a thrill ran through his powerful body. Contrition was a good driver, but here was a lady who really knew how to drive! The message that came down the ribbons to him told him that there was a champion, someone he'd give the last drop of his blood to please. He settled into his championship trot, his race-winning trot, his blood singing, his muscles leaping with joy. Through the streets of Albany they went, with Jewel's eyes flashing with triumph. It had been a long time but she hadn't forgotten, and now she cursed all the years that had been wasted.

"We're going shopping," Jewel said. She guided Zeus around the corner and set him in the direction of the business district. Pedestrians and the occupants of other wheeled vehicles gaped to see them go, their mouths falling open with astonishment. Wasn't that old Mrs. Haywood, driving Justin Odets's trotter? It was, they'd swear it was, because Miss Phoebe Haywood was with her, and the young lady who was a newcomer to Albany and whom Phoebe had made her bosom friend. Old Mrs. Haywood, not only abroad on the streets of Albany but driving a spirited trotter and giving every evidence of enjoying it! Albany had its main topic of conversation for weeks to come.

Jewel pulled up in front of Mr. Daniel Greenleigh's establishment. "Miss Verndon, please step inside and apprise Mr. Greenleigh that I wish him to attend me personally, outside."

It gave Contrition the most exquisite pleasure to apprise Mr. Greenleigh of that fact. Mr. Greenleigh, Albany's leading haberdasher, patently didn't believe her until he'd walked to the door of his establishment and seen Mrs. Jewel Haywood with his own eyes. He was beside the buggy in two seconds flat, bowing, overcome with honor.

"Mrs. Haywood! How may I serve you?"

"I wish to see some canes. Suitable for a lady. Your best, mind you."

"Certainly! Immediately! I won't be a moment!" Mr. Greenleigh disappeared back inside his shop to appear almost instantly again with half a dozen canes in his arms.

"No," Jewel said, rejecting one, a handsome affair of polished mahogany. "No," rejecting another. Her eye was caught by an ebony cane, a queenly cane, with a silver knob fashioned into a horse's head. "That one. Put it on my husband's account. I'll take it with me now."

"May I express my delight in seeing you abroad?" Mr. Greenleigh inquired, quivering with delight.

"You may. Miss Verndon, get in."

Contrition climbed in, and Jewel lifted the ribbons, and Zeus, quivering with even more delight than Mr. Greenleigh, stepped out. This, Zeus thought, was more like it, after all those weeks of having only Justin to drive him. Three ladies, and the one driving him someone to delight his heart! If Justin had popped up at that moment and attempted to repossess him, Zeus would have taken the greatest pleasure in biting him.

Phoebe, holding the cane and admiring it, asked, "Grandmother, does this mean that you're going to try to walk?"

"I am not going to try to walk. I can already walk. I am merely going to do a good deal more walking than I have been doing, and I will have the cane to assist me if I should need it. It's rather a handsome cane, don't you think?"

"It's a beautiful cane! It's so beautiful that I almost wish I needed one!" Phoebe said.

"Don't talk rubbish. There's no pleasure in being crippled, unless it's the pleasure of being able to withhold yourself from a man you hate by denying him any pleasure in you and denying him more children. Even so, it's a high price to pay, and I wouldn't recommend it just for the purposes of getting even. A cane wouldn't be a bad idea, though. You could use it to beat Myron Coverdale over the head after you're married when he sets out to prove that you have no rights and that he has no obligation to respect your opinions or your wishes."

Phoebe gasped, so shocked that she was speechless. Contrition was fairly shaken herself. She hadn't expected that Jewel would be so outspoken with Phoebe, who'd always been so protected that she had no idea of any of the facts of life, let alone those pertaining to the marriage bed. But she saw what Jewel was about. Phoebe's grandmother wanted to beat it into her granddaughter's head that men aren't all that apt to make women happy, and that women were largely powerless to do anything about it, so if they had a modicum of intelligence they'd look for a man who'd at least make some effort to make them happy.

Giving one sharp nod of her head, Jewel stopped her tirade. "Good afternoon, Mr. Adams. Good afternoon, Mrs. Marshall. It's a delightful day for a drive, isn't it?" Jewel nodded from one side of the street to the other, inclining her head as she recognized old acquaintances. Their progress was regal, Jewel's bearing was majestic. Phoebe's cheeks glowed pink after her initial shock of white, and Contrition purred with contentment. Things were going the way she wanted them to at last.

"We're going to have a hayride," Contrition told Justin.

Justin was surprised. "We are? Who's giving it? I haven't been invited yet."

"You're giving it. You have a big sleigh, don't you? Every farm has a big sleigh. We can't waste this snow, it's perfect for a hayride! We'll have our hayride and afterwards, we'll have supper at Maple Lane and stay all night, you have plenty of bedrooms. It's going to be fun! Why didn't you think of it before, Justin?"

"Who's coming?" Justin asked.

"Phoebe, of course. And Lotta. I expect you'll have to invite Myron Coverdale, but maybe we'll be lucky and he won't accept. But Phoebe will come because I'll make her. And Mrs. Haywood."

"I can't picture Mrs. Haywood going on a hayride!" Justin said. "She's entirely too stiff and formal, such a crass form of entertainment would be beneath her dignity."

"Not Elizabeth Haywood, you ninny. Jewel."

"Contrition, you aren't serious! Old Mrs. Haywood couldn't possibly go on a hayride!"

"She isn't old, and she can go on a hayride, and she wouldn't miss it. She'll be our chief chaperone. Even John Haywood and Betty Haywood can't say it isn't proper for Phoebe to come if her grandmother comes. You'll have to think of the others to invite."

"May I invite my sisters and their husbands and children?"

"Are they nice? Not stiff and stuffy?"

"They aren't a bit stiff and stuffy. My parents are, a little, but they wouldn't want to go on a hayride. My sisters and their children would love it. And they want to meet you, and this will be a good opportunity. They've heard that I'm courting you."

"Good. As long as they aren't stiff and stuffy, they can come," Contrition said. "I don't want anyone frightening Phoebe and spoiling her good time. She's timid, you know."

"I've noticed. They won't frighten her." Justin was beginning to brighten. He should have thought of the hayride before. Mrs. Vorees would be delighted. A houseful of company was the thing she liked best, and they hadn't had a houseful of company since before Justin had won Zeus in that card game. A house party, it was just the thing! He was glad that he'd finally thought of it.

"Scat," Contrition said. "Go call on your sisters and invite them. I'm going to call on Phoebe; you needn't invite her and Jewel because I'll relay your invitation. This is Wednesday; we'll have the hayride on Friday so that everyone can be back home in plenty of time to rest up for church on Sunday. It had better not warm up and melt the snow!"

It wouldn't dare, Justin thought, not if Contrition didn't want it to.

There were those old bearskin robes stored away up in the attic at Maple Lane; Mrs. Vorees wouldn't have let the moths get at them. He'd get them out and have her air them so they wouldn't reek of camphor. He'd have the bells on the harness polished up, and bright red ribbons in the horses' manes and tails, and Mrs. Vorees would prepare a feast. Hot spiced cider, he thought. Everyone would want hot spiced cider after the hayride.

He scattered. Contrition, not bothering to change her dress, hitched Zeus up to the sleigh Justin had driven in for her use just now, with a saddle along so he could ride Senaca back. Contrition had to have a sleigh if she were going to get around in the winter.

Contrition's cheeks were red with excitement as much as with the cold when she arrived at the Haywood mansion. Jewel was in the drawing room, giving Elizabeth a hard time just for the fun of it. Jewel wanted to have the furniture moved back to the way she'd had it arranged before her accident, not left in the entirely different positions Betty had had the pieces placed in when she had taken charge.

"That breakfront is to go between the two tall windows where it belongs," Jewel was saying, and she pounded her cane on the floor for emphasis. "For the life of me I can't see why you moved it. And have those vases of cattails on the mantel removed; they're dust catchers and serve no earthly purpose. You can also get rid of those hideous wax flowers under that glass dome. Artificial flowers are an abomination. If you're fond of them, you can take them to your own room where they won't offend people with better taste."

"Mother Haywood! Really!"

"Yes, really! And see to it now, before you forget."

"Mrs. Haywood, Mr. Odets has invited us, you and me and Phoebe, on a hayride on Friday," Contrition announced.

"It's out of the question!" Elizabeth Haywood said, her face scarlet. "A hayride! You will decline the invitation, of course, Mother Haywood."

Phoebe, who had been making herself small behind her grandmother's chair, made herself even smaller, but her face registered eager yearning.

"Most certainly we shall accept the invitation! I haven't been on a hayride since I was a girl! It will be a joy. Every young lady should go on hayrides, it's part of being a girl. Friday, you say? I only wish it were tomorrow!"

"Mr. Odets had to have time to invite his sisters and their families," Contrition explained. "It will all be very proper, Mrs. Haywood, with Phoebe's grandmother there, and Mr. Odets's married sisters. Mr. Coverdale will be invited as well."

A little of the yearning went out of Phoebe's face, but not much. She'd still get to go on the hayride and see Maple Lane again and Pumpkin. But most of all she'd be near Justin.

"My father-in-law will undoubtedly forbid it," Betty Haywood said, smug with having what she was sure was the last word.

"My husband can forbid it from here to doomsday. We're going," Jewel said. "Or I'll have Miss Verndon spread it throughout Albany that he forbade it because he considers the Odets beneath our social station. The Odets have a great many friends as well as business associates, and they wouldn't take such a slight kindly. It would certainly have a bearing on the election, when Gerald gets around to running for governor."

And so she told John Haywood that evening. Gerald was not consulted, although he would have had no objection to the hayride if he had been consulted. John Haywood seethed. Why hadn't Jewel remained an invalid, shut away in her rooms were she could cause no trouble? The devil of it was that Jewel's threat was valid. If she carried it out, the Haywoods would lose more friends than they could afford to lose. Every vote counted, and there were matters of business, as well, some of which had to be conducted with friends of the Odets family.

"Don't you think that it's wonderful that my health has improved to the degree that I can enjoy such outings?" Jewel demanded of her husband. "And that I can take my place again as the mistress of your house and be your hostess when we entertain?" Her eyes dared him to say that it wasn't wonderful.

"It is, indeed. It's virtually a miracle," John Haywood said, his voice dry. His eyes were cold as he looked at his wife before he turned to his daughter-in-law. "Elizabeth, I can find no objection to the outing since, as has been pointed out, it will be properly chaperoned."

"I'll have another half-glass of this excellent Madeira." Jewel tapped her glass. "Betty, I think you should forego any more. Wine is fattening, you know, and while I can use that quality to advantage, you should begin to have some concern for your weight. Your color is altogether too high."

Her color even higher, Elizabeth Haywood excused herself from the table. Reflecting that it had been an ill wind that had blown Miss Dianna Verndon into Albany, the cause of a great deal of her discomfiture, Betty Haywood counted the days until spring when

warmer winds would blow Miss Dianna Verndon away again, and she fervently hoped that this year spring would be early.

The snow didn't melt before Friday. Just as Justin had thought, it wouldn't have dared. Phoebe was ecstatic, the more so because Mr. Coverdale had declined the pleasure of so mundane an amusement as a hayride.

Jewel was in her element. Martha and Lucinda, Justin's sisters, were comfortably unaffected women several years Justin's senior, who took to Contrition and Phoebe immediately and who were inordinately pleased that Jewel was able to get around and about again after her years of invalidism. The children, all seven of them, were beside themselves with excitement. Pumpkin rubbed against Phoebe's ankles and purred, and Phoebe was as near to heaven as she thought she could ever get on this earth.

Contrition was everywhere, bossing things. In a nice way, of course. Dianna Verndon, Martha and Lucinda thought, nodding with satisfaction, was exactly what Justin needed, a young woman with the drive that their younger brother lacked, one who'd keep him on an even keel, a desirable addition to the family. They had pedigree enough to go around. Even her lack of dowry was not an impediment; Contrition's knowledge about farms and the profitable running of them more than made up for the lack of money or goods that she could bring to a marriage. Martha looked at her husband Simon, and he nodded at her. Lucinda's husband, Luke Benson, had not been able to come, but Simon Lauder would agree with his wife and his sister-in-law that Dianna Verndon was entirely suitable when Justin's parents questioned them.

Justin beamed. It seemed that he couldn't stop beaming. The hayride-house party was a complete success. Jewel reigned supreme and Contrition bossed. It was odd that he'd never noticed, while he'd been with her with the Olympians, just how bossy she was. Still, he told himself, still beaming, it was a nice kind of bossiness, and she was so efficient that she had a right to take charge.

The air during the hayride itself was just snappy enough to be exhilarating and give the horses an incentive to trot along smartly, the sleigh bells jingling as the riders sang. Snug under one of the bearskin robes, Phoebe sat next to Justin on one side while Contri-

tion sat next to him on the other. They were crowded so closely together that Phoebe's body actually touched his, sending thrill after thrill through her, until her head swam and her voice rang out as sweet as the sleigh bells themselves, not in the least afraid to laugh and sing here in this happy company.

Contribution and Phoebe, as the youngest women, helped Mrs. Vorees get the supper on the table and helped her clear up afterwards. Martha and Lucinda insisted on rolling up their sleeves and washing and drying the dishes. Mrs. Vorees had done enough by preparing the feast, she should rest now, and then join them in the library in front of the crackling fireplace to drink hot spiced cider and roast apples. Phoebe had never known that wealthy people, socially important people, could be so friendly and unconventional. This was a whole new world for her, one she had never dreamed of.

She cried in her sleep that night, without waking. She cried because the dream was ending and in the morning she'd have to return to the Haywood mansion and the life that terrified and stifled her. Beside her, Contribution gathered her into her arms and soothed her. Her poor little brown mouse of a one half of a sister was learning, and if tears were a part of the learning, it couldn't be helped. It would all be worth it in the end.

"We're going to have a skating party," Contribution told Justin as Christmas approached.

"We are? Where?"

"At Maple Lane, you dolt. The pond is frozen solid."

"I didn't know you could skate."

"Of course I can't skate, but I can learn. Everyone else can skate, can't they? Except Phoebe, and she can learn, too."

"You don't have any skates," Justin pointed out to her.

"Don't tell me that there aren't skates at Maple Lane! You've told me that your whole family goes there during the winter, as well as in the summer, and they must skate." Contribution was aching to get on a pair of skates. Anything she had never tried before was an adventure that she had no intention of missing. Besides, a skating party was a good excuse for getting Phoebe and Justin together again. Phoebe was weakening, Contribution knew she was. Every time Phoebe looked at Justin, her heart was in her eyes.

Justin was proving more difficult. The idiot still thought that he was in love with Contrition. Men were so dense it was a wonder they managed to survive. If it weren't for women taking care of them, they probably would all have died off thousands of years ago.

"Of course there are skates. There are skates all over the place," Justin said, his face brightening. "What a good idea! I'll have Hans sharpen the blades."

Jewel, mercifully, did not insist on attempting to skate, although she watched for half an hour, sitting in a chair that Peter carried to the pond for her, well wrapped up in a bearskin robe. Jewel advised and jeered and said they should have seen her when she was a girl, she could have skated circles around all of them. Jewel was in her element. When she'd had enough of laughing at spills and advising, she had Hans take her back to the house, where she sat in one of the rocking chairs by the kitchen hearth and traded recipes with Mrs. Vorees and peeled potatoes. The paring knife flashed as fast as her tongue. Contrition's advent into her life had given her a reason to come back to the land of the living, and peeling potatoes was a joy because the potatoes she was peeling would feed a hungry crowd of young, laughing, and happy people.

Thinking that Contrition might never have come to Albany made cold shivers run up and down Jewel's back. It was incredible that she'd never had any inkling that she was possessed of such a remarkable granddaughter. She adored Phoebe. Phoebe was the light of her life. But now she had Contrition as well, and her cup was running over.

There was only one fly in the ointment, and that was Contrition's determination to plunge the entire family into a scandal that would ruin them. Not that Jewel blamed her. In Contrition's place, she would have done the same thing, and the devil himself wouldn't have stopped her.

When the final card was laid down, Jewel would back Contrition to the limit. Preventing the impending marriage between Phoebe and Myron Coverdale was worth any sacrifice that had to be made. But Phoebe would be hurt, and David and Walter would be hurt. Gerald would be hurt, and even though he deserved being hurt, he was Jewel's son, and she didn't believe that he deserved to be hurt as

badly as he would be when the storm broke. All the same, Phoebe was not going to marry Myron Coverdale, not if she and Contrition between them had to pull the world down around all of them.

At the moment, she wished that she had a firecracker to set off under Justin Odets. So far, in spite of all Contrition's scheming, Justin hadn't taken the bait; he still thought of Phoebe as Contrition's timid little friend and nothing more. But Jewel had faith in Contrition. It was a good thing that she did, too, because if she hadn't, she would have been as jittery as a cat looking for a place to have kittens.

At the pond, Traveler, the farm collie, had discovered the skating party and was running himself exhausted as he chased after the skaters and nipped at their heels, slipping and skidding on the ice in a frenzy of joy. He tripped Justin and Justin went down in a heap. He tripped Phoebe, who fell on top of Justin, exactly where she would rather be than anywhere else in the world. The alarm on Justin's face as he made sure that she wasn't hurt would have been worth a broken ankle. Lotta, who had been holding Phoebe up, escaped falling because she already knew how to skate. She smiled with happy satisfaction when Justin insisted on taking Phoebe's hands himself and helping her learn, an expression that Contrition echoed as she herself wobbled, with her ankles trying to turn in, until Lotta came to help her.

"It's so easy when you're holding me!" Phoebe enthused, her cheeks flaming and her eyes sparkling like diamonds. "Just see how fast Dianna is learning, and I can't seem to learn at all! Dianna hardly needs any help at all!"

Contrition, Justin thought with just a trace of sourness, never needed any help at all. Contrition was self-sufficient. But Phoebe was satisfactorily helpless, balm to a male ego. Phoebe looked up to him, she thought he was brave and strong and confident. He was, of course, but it was nice to have a pretty girl let him know that she thought he was. Justin showed off, making figure-eights and skating backward, while Phoebe clapped her hands and worshipped him. Justin skated faster and his skate struck a rough spot on the ice; he fell flat on his back.

Contrition skated over to where Phoebe was kneeling beside him,

filled with concern and fright. "It's your own fault. You would show off!" Contrition said. "It served you right!"

"Dianna, how can you be so mean?" Phoebe protested, her eyes filling with tears. "Anyone would fall if their skate struck a raised place like that! Mr. Odets, are you sure you're all right? Let me help you up!"

They might have made it if Contrition hadn't given Justin a shove and sent both of them tumbling down into a heap again, arms and legs tangled. Phoebe gasped with shock and Justin seethed with indignation.

"Darn it, Dianna, you might have hurt her! Don't you know she's fragile?" This time, Justin made it to his feet and pulled Phoebe to hers and made a great business of brushing her off and making sure that Contrition's mean trick hadn't caused the gentler, more tender girl any damage. There were times when Contrition made him angry, as much as he loved her. She ought to be more careful of little Phoebe Haywood; Phoebe needed someone to look out for her, not to play dangerous practical jokes on her!

Skating away from them with a carefree laugh, there was a glint of satisfaction in Contrition's eyes. Justin was awfully dense but he was learning, and if he were cross with her, all the better. Phoebe, her little brown mouse of a one half of a sister, would never do anything to make him cross.

They feasted, all of them around the huge dining-room table. They rested and then they skated again, late in the afternoon. Hans and Jacob had built a huge bonfire beside the pond, and the children's shouts and screams of delight filled the air. Snowball fights developed and the little girls made "angels" in the snow. The boys built a snowman while their mothers watched indulgently, warming themselves by the bonfire. Phoebe joined the children, nearly hysterical with happiness as she helped roll the huge balls for the body of the snowman. It was enough, Contrition thought, to make a body cry. Anyone could see that Phoebe had never got to build a snowman before, and she made sure that Justin was aware of it. Making sure was simple.

"Isn't it enough to make a body cry?" Contrition asked him. "Anyone can see that Phoebe never had any fun before!"

When Justin's reaction was exactly what she wanted it to be, when he turned protective and determined that Phoebe should have all the fun possible, it annoyed Contrition that she felt a trifle disgruntled. Well, she was only human, wasn't she? Justin had been hers before she'd decided to give him to Phoebe, and why shouldn't she feel that she was getting the dirty end of the stick by being so all-fired noble? She couldn't have it both ways, dang it, so she'd better be satisfied that her scheming was finally beginning to work! She wasn't going to be jealous, she'd be double-danged blasted if she was!

In the evening, they roasted chestnuts and popped popcorn in front of the fireplace fire, and Phoebe, caught up in the revelry, was persuaded to play the old pianoforte that had been at Maple Lane for nobody was sure how long. It was a little out of tune but that only added to the hilarity. Justin sang offkey on purpose to make it even funnier. Miss Haywood had to enjoy herself, poor little Phoebe Haywood who never had any fun!

"Isn't it a shame that Mr. Coverdale couldn't come to the skating party?" Contrition said slyly. "I'm sure he would have enjoyed it as much as we're enjoying it!"

Phoebe's happy expression disappeared like a drop of water on hot sand. "I'm afraid that skating parties wouldn't appeal to Mr. Coverdale," she said, her voice small and miserable.

Justin gave Contrition a venomous look. He'd have thought that she'd know better than to say something that would break Phoebe's happy mood. Contrition blithely ignored him.

"Oh, but Mr. Coverdale is so handsome!" she said. "I expect he can be forgiven for not enjoying such bucolic pleasures as skating parties when he's so handsome! What a lucky girl you are, Phoebe! You'll have the handsomest young husband in Albany, and you'll be so happy with him that you won't miss going on hayrides and skating parties at all."

Contrition thought that she ought to be horsewhipped for making Phoebe look so miserable, and Justin's second venomous glance at her told her that he thought she ought to be horsewhipped. But how in tunket else was she going to bring home to Phoebe that she'd be a

whole lot happier not being married to Myron Coverdale and being married to Justin Odets instead?

"Look!" Justin said. "Here's Pumpkin!" He picked up the calico cat and put her in Phoebe's arms. "She'll have her kittens any day now. You'll have to come and see them, Miss Haywood. I'll call for you myself and bring you out to see them. Miss Verndon as well, if she would care to come."

Idiot, fool, imbecile! Contrition raged at herself as she flinched inwardly at the tone of Justin's voice which left no doubt that he hoped that she wouldn't care to come. You're getting what you want, so stop this nonsense! All the same; it was hard to give up her last chance at having all that Justin could give her. This house, this farm, these wonderful Odets, all of them, who were so willing to welcome her into their family, make her one of them. A real family of her own! Her heart ached just to think of it. And Justin, who would always be good to her and never, never treat her with the contempt that Henry Davenport subjected her to! Good, sweet, kind Justin, and here she was handing him over to Phoebe as though he weren't worth a second thought. She'd have second thoughts, all right, she'd have a lot of second thoughts when it was too late!

Maybe she ought to have those second thoughts right now. It was none of her doing that Phoebe was scheduled to marry Myron Coverdale. It had been decided long before Contrition had come to Albany to bring her father to ruin. No blame could be attached to her if she stopped her plotting and scheming right now, if she gave up bringing her father to ruin, and married Justin instead.

It wasn't her fault that Phoebe was timid and shy and afraid of her own shadow. If she didn't want to marry Myron Coverdale, let her work up a little gumption and say so and dig in her heels and make it stick. Contrition wasn't Phoebe's keeper or her guardian angel. In this world, you had to look out for yourself!

Mine, Contrition thought. It could still be all mine. All I have to do is say yes. I deserve it. I'm entitled to it. I never had anything. It's my turn! Henry is gone, dang him, and I'll never see him again, but if I can't have him, I could have all this, and any girl who doesn't think that this is a danged good substitute ought to be sent to Bedlam!

The bed was wonderfully comfortable. The room was everything she had ever dreamed of for a bedroom, large, with rugs on the floor and curtains at the windows and a fireplace to warm it in the winter and cross ventilation to cool it in the summer. The washstand had flower-painted accessories, forget-me-nots brightening the pitcher and bowl. This house, Justin, Justin's family, were more than she had ever dreamed of having for her own.

All she had to do was reach out her hand and it would all be hers. If she didn't, she had a very good idea that she'd regret it all her life.

26

If the house-party gatherings at Maple Lane were filled with warmth and the joyful sense of belonging, the entertainments that the friends of the Haywoods gave for the engaged couple were a complete contrast. To Contrition's mind, they were the dreariest, bleakest, most boring affairs ever devised by human beings. And because of the Haywoods' social prominence, there were a great many of these affairs.

Take the Amhursts, for instance. Mr. and Mrs. Amhurst were so stiff and formal that Contrition was afraid to sneeze. She was afraid to sneeze because once she had sneezed, and Mr. and Mrs. Amhurst had looked at her as though she were some alien creature of which they had never seen the like before.

At the DeVeers' stately home, nearly as stately as the Haywoods', Contrition dropped her table napkin, and the cold, disapproving stares when she'd bent to retrieve it herself, instead of waiting for the servants to supply her with another, had made her feel like crawling under the table with the napkin.

Snobs, supercilious snobs, every one of them, and there wasn't a

trace of humor in the lot, and of all of them, the Coverdales were the worst and of the Coverdales, Myron Coverdale was the worst.

But if Contrition were bored, disgusted, and impatient with such pomposity, Phoebe was in agony every time she had to appear as the guest of honor at one of these functions. The center of all eyes, no least word or gesture going unnoticed, and judged by all and sundry, Phoebe was so terrified that she turned into a zombie. Her hands trembled, she tripped on her skirt, she stammered. And all the time, Myron's cold and judging eyes were on her, condemning her for her social awkwardness, his handsome face wincing at every gaffe. If it hadn't been for Contrition and Justin and Jewel bolstering her courage, she might have died of humiliation and fright.

Jewel was a lifesaver. Now that she had come out of her self-imposed exile, she was invited to every affair. Her entrances, leaning only a little on her silver-headed cane, were worthy of an empress.

Jewel, Contrition opined, was a caution. She had not only set her own household on its ear but now she was engaged in setting all of Albany on its heels, as well. It tickled Contrition right down to her bones to see how Albany's society fawned on her, leaving Elizabeth Haywood to take second place. There were a good many ladies who had suffered from slights from Elizabeth Haywood and who were all too anxious to transfer their allegiance to the matriarch of the Haywood family. Elizabeth seethed, John Haywood's eyes were cold with fury, Gerald was bewildered, and Phoebe was torn between being delighted for her grandmother and shrinking from the inevitable repercussions.

"What's the matter, isn't your carpet clean?" Jewel asked when Contrition was disgraced by attempting to retrieve her napkin. Elizabeth Haywood gasped, her face going white. Mrs. DeVeers all but strangled, her face flaming. Phoebe tried to hide her titter behind her hand, Myron Coverdale was furious, but Contrition laughed outright.

"What's a speck of dirt between friends?" Contrition wanted to know. "We all have to eat a peck of it before we die!"

"You're the talk of the town!" Elizabeth accused her mother-in-law. "It's a disgrace the way you go bowling along the streets,

driving that unmanageable trotter yourself with only Phoebe and Miss Verndon for company, instead of taking the carriage as befits your social position! And the way you behave at social affairs is even more of a disgrace! I'll never be able to hold my head up in public again after what you said about Mrs. DeVeer's carpet!"

"Zeus is perfectly manageable and Mable DeVeer's carpet is her own affair. If it isn't clean enough not to sully a napkin, then she should be ashamed of herself. I've a good mind to ask Justin Odets if he'll sell Zeus to me," Jewel said complacently.

"And all those outings at Maple Lane! Really, Mother, do you think it's wise? I suppose the family is acceptable enough, but they are hardly in a class with the Haywoods or any of our friends."

"All the better for the Odets. They aren't in any danger of being stifled to death by boredom," Jewel said. "And Justin is courting Dianna and Dianna is Phoebe's best friend and the outings at Maple Lane are perfectly in order. As for Dianna, she's quite the most delightful girl I've ever had the privilege of knowing; she's worth all of your prissy young Albany misses rolled up in one."

"A nobody! It would have been a mercy if she'd chosen some other community to winter in. Although she hasn't required the attention of a physician since she's been here, and that's odd in itself."

"There's nothing odd about it. She hasn't required the attentions of a physician because she hasn't been ill, and she hasn't been ill because she's living in Albany rather than in the country where the winters are more severe."

"And if she marries Mr. Odets, she'll be here permanently, and I expect that you and Phoebe will go on accepting her socially," Elizabeth said, her mouth a hard line that expressed her displeasure.

"You may be sure of it," Jewel said, enjoying seeing Betty's distress.

If Jewel enjoyed Elizabeth Haywood's distress, Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was even more delighted. Anything that discomfited Betty Haywood comforted Mrs. Ethel May Creighton, and the prospect of having dear Miss Verndon marry into the county society was more to her liking than anything that had happened during the last twenty years.

Contrition continued to cultivate Mrs. Ethel May Creighton because, although she detested the woman, when the time came for her to

bring her father to ruin, Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was vital to her plans.

"Dear Mrs. Creighton, neither Lotta nor I can manage to make a custard that isn't grainy! I'm sure you know the secret, if only you'll share it with us." Her subterfuge almost made Contrition choke. She could make the best custard in the state. Eggs and milk being in plentiful supply on Amos Reeves's farm, custards had been an important part of their menus. Amos Reeves liked his desserts, and custard was his favorite because it could be made virtually without cost to him.

"Why, it's perfectly simple! You must remove the custard from the oven while the center is still runny; it will set while it's cooling. But if you leave it in the oven until it sets, it will be overcooked and grainy." Mrs. Ethel May Creighton preened herself, delighted to be of such assistance to dear Miss Verndon.

"Mrs. Creighton, I really shouldn't mention this, but what did you think of Mrs. Gerald Haywood's gown, the one she wore to the Randolphs' party? Personally, I think that that particular shade of purple is most unbecoming to her florid complexion. You always dress with such perfect taste, with everything so becoming to you!" Contrition struggled against nausea. On this occasion, Mrs. Ethel May Creighton was wearing a dress so bespangled with jet beads that it made her look like a crow in deep mourning.

"My dear, I couldn't agree more! Betty Haywood should never wear purple! But then, some ladies have taste and others lack it." Mrs. Ethel May Creighton fairly quivered with delight. "You yourself are a fashion plate, my dear! Betty Haywood would do well to have your Carlotta make Phoebe's trousseau. If you'd be willing to lend Carlotta's services, I shall suggest it to Betty the next time I see her!"

"I only wish I could make Phoebe's trousseau," Lotta said after Mrs. Ethel May Creighton had left, determined to slight Betty Haywood by insinuating that a common maid-companion could make Phoebe a more attractive trousseau than the high-priced dress-makers Betty Haywood would procure. "I could do so much for her! Her coloring is really lovely; she only needs the right shades to

complement it and simpler, more elegant styles so her clothes wouldn't overwhelm her."

"Some day you're going to be a dressmaker," Contrition promised her. "I'll set my mind to it and we'll make it happen."

Lotta turned pale. "Oh, no! No lady would buy from a woman who had been an actress! She'd feel contaminated!"

"Lotta, don't be such a ninny! Any woman in the world would buy from anyone who could make them the most attractive clothes in the city! I do wish you'd stop running yourself down! How many times do I have to tell you that you aren't a sinner just because you're an actress?"

Twice, and twice only, Myron Coverdale condescended to attend a gathering at Maple Lane, and his disdain for the farm and everything to do with the country subdued Phoebe to such an extent that she shriveled.

"I cannot understand for the life of me how you can enjoy such bucolic pastimes!" Myron told her. "And in such crude company at that. It isn't as though you're obligated to accept these invitations, my dear. The Odets are bad enough but Miss Verndon is downright common! After we are married, you will have to content yourself with more suitable pursuits and society as will befit a married lady of your station."

Phoebe was stricken. Not see Contrition any more, never get to see Justin, or Martha or Lucinda and their children! She'd die! Her face became pale and drawn, her eyes were filled with pain, and tears were always just beneath the surface.

If Dianna were in her place, she wouldn't stand being told who she could and couldn't see. Phoebe railed at herself, trying to dredge up a little of Dianna's self-confidence and courage, but her lifetime of subservience to her mother and her grandfather was too deep-seated for her to defy her fiancé, much less her husband. She'd ask her grandmother what to do. Her grandmother would have an idea; Jewel always knew what to do, now that she'd stopped hiding in her rooms and had resumed her place as the mistress of the house.

"Tell him to stick his head in a bucket of water and see if it will shrink down to size!" Jewel said tartly. As Phoebe wouldn't dare tell

Mr. Coverdale to do any such thing, her grandmother wasn't of much help, after all.

"How much longer is this going to go on?" Justin demanded when he drove into Albany to see Contrition. The only times he ever got to see her alone were when he made a special trip. "The suspense is killing me!"

"Aren't you enjoying yourself? All those parties at Maple Lane! They're wonderful, Justin. I never knew that anything could be so much fun!"

"Of course I'm enjoying myself! As much as I can enjoy myself, never knowing from one minute to the next what you might do next! Here it is the middle of March already, and you still haven't let us announce our engagement! People are beginning to talk. My mother and father took me to task only last week. They like you, my whole family likes you, they're ready to give a ball to announce our engagement, and still you keep putting me off!"

"I can't be engaged to you until after I've brought my father to ruin, and after I've brought him to ruin, your family won't want you to be engaged to me," Contrition pointed out, perfectly reasonably. "I'll be disgraced, I'll be branded a bastard, and even worse, an actress, before all of Albany."

"I don't care about that! I'm going to marry you anyway, no matter what anybody says or thinks! But you don't have to do it, Contrition. You don't have to brand yourself a bastard and an actress! All you have to do is forget this revenge you're so set on and we could be the happiest couple in the state of New York, without any unpleasantness at all. If Phoebe hasn't made up her mind by now, after all this time and all we've done to make her see how miserable she'll be with Myron Coverdale, she never will make up her mind! And if you're so all-fired fond of Phoebe, hasn't it ever occurred to you that if you do what you're determined to do, you'll never be able to see her again?"

"I've thought about it," Contrition said. That was an understatement. She thought about it all the time. Her little brown mouse, her one half of a sister! And she'd never see Jewel again, or that scamp David, because she and Justin would be ostracized, and how could

she do that to Justin, even if she were willing to give up Phoebe and Jewel?

Give it up, her common sense told her. Give it up and take what you're offered! If Justin hadn't fallen in love with Phoebe by now, he probably never would, and there was no reason one of them shouldn't have him, and it was just her good luck that she was the one Justin wanted and not Phoebe.

She'd done her best. She'd never have to suffer from a guilty conscience on that score. And one thing was certain. She wouldn't be able to stay in Albany much longer. Her money was running out. Either she'd have to bring her father to ruin immediately and go back and join the Olympians, or she'd have to marry Justin and give up her idea of revenge.

"I'll make my decision before Phoebe and Jewel and I come out to Maple Lane next week to gather pussy willows," she promised Justin. Jewel was determined to have pussy willows; she said they were the only thing beside fresh flowers she'd have in the house. None too happy, Justin had to be satisfied with that.

On Friday morning, Lotta sat in the very back row at the huge religious meeting in the park, where nearly all of Albany and great numbers of county residents had gathered to hear Mr. Charles Grandison Finney speak. It was Charles Grandison Finney's first meeting of the year, and Albany was in an uproar over the honor of being the place where the great evangelist was going to save the souls of everyone within earshot of him.

Charles Grandison Finney was a stern man, a pulpit-pounding man, a man with no discernible lovable traits. His mission in life was to terrorize sinners into mending their ways, and his success was so great that he was famous throughout the state. He gave particular attention to cities and towns because they were hotbeds of sin, veritable bottomless pits of sin, and he was the only man who could save them from the clutches of Satan.

Dressed in her most modest brown dress, a shawl clutched around her shoulders and with her face all but hidden by the brim of the bonnet she had stripped of its adornments for this occasion, Lotta quivered and shivered even before Charles Grandison Finney began to speak. All around her, other people were quivering and shivering

in fearful anticipation of the damnation Charles Grandison Finney would soon hurl at their sinful selves. One overweight lady had already fallen off the bench in some kind of seizure, even though the evangelist had yet to say one word, but only stood there glaring at them as though he were contemplating leaving them, sinners that they were, without making an attempt to snatch them from the everlasting fires of hades.

It was both better and worse than even Lotta had hoped and feared. His voice striking terror into every heart, his eyes pinning them to their seats, helpless to escape, Charles Grandison Finney thundered out his message of hellfire and destruction. No sin, no matter how trivial, was overlooked; no sin, no matter how minuscule, would ever be overlooked; all were noted and written down in fiery letters by the angels of justice, to be read off on that day when all sinners, even the least of them, would be plunged into the heart of the inferno, never to emerge.

It would be too late then, no amount of repentance would avail, the time to repent was now, this moment, this second, because the hand of God might touch them where they sat and it would be forever too late.

Drunkards, wastrels, blasphemers, Sabbath breakers, those who sought after material things, those who were envious of others more fortunate than they, all were damned. Spite-speakers, revenge-seekers, harlots, actors and actresses . . .

"Have mercy, have mercy!" the sinners sobbed. "Save me! I repent, I repent!" There were several people off their benches now, stricken down by Charles Grandison Finney's words, groveling, weeping, crawling toward the evangelist with their arms outstretched, their cries piteous. A woman was in a convulsion here, a man lay like one dead there, his senses struck from him as he lay unconscious under the burden of his sins.

Harlots, actresses, and actors! Lotta shook. Lotta started to rise to her feet, her face ashen, her heart bursting with fear. A mewling sound was torn, tortured, from her throat. Waves of blackness settled over her. She toppled and fell, as unconscious as the man in the fourth row in front of her, but nobody took note. All attention was riveted on the evangelist who, by his words, was condemning

them; who, by his grace, would intervene for them if only they would repent. Children, dragged to the meeting by their parents, screamed with terror. Toward the front, a man was retching, sending the reek of alcohol to all those who were near him. "I repent, I repent!" the man howled. "Only save me!"

On the still-brown, trampled grass of the park, Lotta lay motionless, prevented by her unconscious state from throwing herself at the seat of mercy and publicly divulging the reason she and Contrition were here in Albany, sinners both, plotting to bring Mr. Gerald Haywood to ruin. Actresses, condemned by that fact alone, further damning themselves by seeking the revenge that belonged to the Lord!

At Maple Lane, Jewel was in the kitchen gossiping with Mrs. Vorees and admiring the armload of pussy willows that Justin and Contrition and Phoebe had cut for her. The young people were in the pasture, where Phoebe was going into raptures over a newborn calf, small enough, its brown eyes as gentle as her own, that she wasn't afraid of it at all.

"Look, look, isn't she darling?" Phoebe cried. "Oh, she's so sweet!"

"It's time we were going," Contrition reminded her. "Mrs. Vorees will have our dinner ready and we have to get back to Albany early because I promised Lotta that I'd go to Mr. Finney's preaching with her this evening."

Phoebe's eyes were wide. "I should so love to go too! But Grandfather and Mother would never permit it. Grandfather says that those meetings are a disgrace, that it's distasteful to see people making public displays of themselves; he says that religion should be quiet and dignified."

He would, Contrition thought! Quiet and dignified and boring, not exciting as Charles Grandison Finney's meetings were reputed to be. She herself had no intention of missing such a show, and Justin was driving back with Senaca so he could accompany them to the evening meeting, it not being proper for two young ladies to attend such an event unescorted.

Reluctantly, Phoebe gave the calf one more pat and obeyed, keeping a wary eye on the mother. Justin kept looking at Contrition,

obviously impatient for a chance to speak to her alone, if only for a moment, because she'd promised she'd give him her answer today; so far she hadn't, and soon it would be too late because she and Phoebe and Jewel would be on their way back to Albany.

Contrition, always impatient, walked on ahead of the other two. Near the barn, in a pen by himself, she passed Brutus, Maple Lane's breeding bull. Brutus was old, and he was as gentle as the calf Phoebe had just been petting. Contrition paused, her brow furrowed, and then, before she could have time to think about it and change her mind, she opened the pen. "Come on," she said, "Come out of there."

Up until this moment, Contrition hadn't made up her mind. At this moment, seeing the bull and with the idea sprung fullblown out of nowhere, she'd made up her mind, and if this didn't work, then she'd tell Justin that she'd give up her revenge against her father, and marry him.

Brutus was agreeable. Contrition's hand on the ring in his nose didn't hurt a bit, and her voice was one that demanded obedience. Brutus ambled out of the pen just as Justin and Phoebe drew near.

Contrition gave Brutus a sharp dig in his ribs and a swat, and her voice raised in a scream.

"Phoebe, look out! The bull is loose!" Just in case, she reached for the pitchfork that was leaning against the outside of the pen, kept there for the unlikely purpose of controlling Brutus if he should take it into his lazy head to act up. Farmers who wanted to live to a ripe old age didn't take chances, even with a bull as old and gentle as Brutus.

Phoebe froze in her tracks, paralyzed. Good lord, don't go fainting, it'll spoil everything, Contrition thought! Justin, his face gone white, with perspiration beading his forehead and running down his back, was almost as terrified as Phoebe. Justin had never handled a bull in his life, that was Hans's job, but Hans and Jacob and Peter were nowhere in sight.

Justin acted. He didn't actually remember acting but he acted. He threw himself in front of Phoebe, grasped the bull by its horns, and shouted, "Get back, Brutus! Get back, I say!"

She'd never seen the like, Contrition marveled. He didn't even

have sense enough to grasp the bull by the ring in its nose! It was a good thing that Brutus was simply confused and didn't have any intention of hurting anybody. Contrition had a firm grip on the pitchfork, but she didn't think she was going to need it so she went on screaming.

Brutus looked at Justin, rolling his eyes, and he let Justin turn him and haul him back into his pen. Justin slammed the gate shut and made sure that it was securely latched before he turned back to Phoebe. And then he was beside Phoebe, his arms were around her, and he was patting her shoulder and saying, "There, there, it's all over, there's no danger, you're all right."

"Oh, Justin, you were so brave! I never saw anything so brave! You subdued that ferocious bull all by yourself and you weren't even afraid!"

Justin, who was on the point of fainting, stiffened his knees and said, "Of course I wasn't afraid; that's what I'm here for, to protect you."

Contrition leaned the pitchfork back against the pen and murmured, "Sorry, Brutus," before she descended on Justin.

"You idiot! You unmitigated idiot! The very idea, running this farm so laxly that that pen was unlatched! We might all have been killed! And you didn't even have the brains to take him by the ring in his nose, you imbecile! I swear you haven't a brain in your stupid head! Phoebe, come on, I can't stand to look at the stupid dolt!"

"Dianna, what are you saying?" Phoebe gasped, "Why, Justin is the bravest man I ever saw! He risked his life to save us!"

"That may be, but it doesn't excuse his stupidity! This is the last time either of us is going to set foot on this farm, I can promise you that!" She grasped Phoebe's arm and pulled her along, with Justin, spluttering helplessly, trailing along behind.

Contrition pushed her advantage to the limit. She refused to stay to eat the dinner Mrs. Vorees had prepared for them. Fortunately, Jewel, who knew her so well, went along with her, and within minutes the three ladies were in the buggy and Zeus was stepping out toward Albany. Justin, his mouth still hanging open, stood watching them disappear.

Contrition was a shrew, that's what she was. He'd been brave, no

man had ever been braver. He'd subdued a ferocious bull and saved Phoebe with his bare hands!

Phoebe! Phoebe might have been killed! Justin's face, red with self-righteous anger, turned white. Phoebe might have been killed, and it would have been his fault, and now he was never going to see her again because Contrition wouldn't let him.

He'd just see about that. Yes, he would! Still shaking with righteous and justified indignation, Justin hitched up Senaca and set out after the ladies. Not that he had any chance of catching up with them. Even with three ladies in their buggy, Zeus was capable of outdistancing Senaca, even if they'd started out at the same time, but Justin wouldn't be far behind.

Ahead of Justin in the other buggy, Phoebe looked straight ahead and refused to speak to Contrition. Phoebe was furious. How could her friend have behaved in such a dreadful manner? How could she have said those dreadful things about Justin after he'd proved himself a hero? She'd never forgive her friend. Dianna wasn't her friend any more, she'd never be her friend again!

"He was a dolt, all right," Jewel agreed with Contrition. "You did quite the right thing to lace him out. And I agree with you wholeheartedly. We'll never visit Maple Lane again!" With all this thrown at her so suddenly, it was a good thing that she was quick-witted. She hadn't even forgotten to take her pussy willows with her when she was hustled out of the farm kitchen with Contrition maligning Justin with every word she said.

"Not that it really matters, Phoebe will be married to Mr. Coverdale in just a few weeks, and then our visits would have come to an end in any case," Contrition said. "Phoebe, don't look so tragic! Once you're married to Mr. Coverdale, you won't have time to think of Maple Lane or Justin, much less miss them! And Mr. Coverdale wouldn't have let you have one of Pumpkin's calico kittens anyway, so it doesn't matter that we won't be able to go back to let you choose one for yourself."

Pumpkin's kittens were frisky, adorable, and full of mischief, and Phoebe had agonized over wondering which one she would choose if she'd have been allowed to have one. "I'd take one home with me so you could see it there, except that Lotta doesn't care for cats . . ."

a blatant lie "... and we'll be going back home very soon anyway, so you haven't actually lost anything. Lucky you, so nearly a bride!"

Phoebe didn't answer her. She was incapable of answering. She'd never see Justin again, except by accident, and her best friend had betrayed her, and she'd never see Pumpkin or the kittens again, and she'd be married to Myron Coverdale and she couldn't bear it, there was no way she could bear it.

Still silent, refusing even to say goodbye, Phoebe entered the Haywood mansion, her body feeling like fire and her heart like ice. Jewel, waiting for Oswald to come and lift her from the buggy, looked at Contrition and said, "Well, Missy, I hope you know what you're doing because I certainly don't!"

"I hope I know what I'm doing, too," Contrition said. "But I won't know for a little while. Probably by this evening, if I've guessed right. I'll come and tell you whether it worked or not, whichever way it goes."

"You'd better or I'll come looking for you!" Jewel said. And then Oswald was there and Contrition drove on home. She stabled Zeus and rubbed him down before she went into the house, to be greeted by a pale and hysterical Lotta.

"Dianna, you can't do it, you can't go through with it, your soul will be forfeit and so will mine for helping you! It's bad enough that we're actresses, but if we repent, if we truly repent, we can still be saved. But if you carry out your revenge against your father, it'll be too late; Mr. Finney made that very clear. I've been praying and praying, Dianna! We'll both pray, please pray with me, or we'll both burn in hades forever!"

"What in the world are you blathering about?" Contrition demanded, tossing her bonnet at the hall tree and missing. Justin should be here any minute now. She stopped to pick up her bonnet and Lotta thought she was kneeling; she fell to her own knees and bowed her head.

"Pray, Dianna! Pray harder than you've ever prayed! I'm praying, but you have to pray too!"

Justin burst into the little entrance hall to find Lotta on her knees,

with her arms wrapped around Contrition's knees in an effort to keep Contrition from rising.

"What's the matter with her?" Justin blurted out in astonishment.

"She's praying," Contrition explained. "Lotta, go upstairs to pray. I'll pray with you later, I promise."

"Honest to goodness, cross your heart?" Lotta gasped, her eyes overflowing with buckets of tears.

"Honest to goodness, cross my heart."

Lotta flew up the stairs with wings on her heels, wings from heaven.

Downstairs, Contrition looked at Justin expectantly. "Well? I gather that you have something to say to me."

"Dianna, I mean Contrition, I know that I've asked you to marry me, and I meant it. Even if you'd thrown yourself into disgrace, I still would have wanted to marry you, I was completely sincere, but . . . but . . ."

"But you don't want to marry me any more," Contrition said.

"No. Well, no. I guess I don't."

"Because you love Phoebe," Contrition said. "When she was in danger and you saved her, you realized that you love her."

"Well, yes. I guess that's right. Dianna, Contrition, I'm sorry, I never meant to hurt you, only after what's happened, now that I realize . . ."

"Stop stammering," Contrition said. "You would have been miserable with me, Justin. I'm bossy. I like to manage everything. There's nothing you can do that I can't do better, and I'd be sure to let you know it every day we lived. You could never have been happy with a bossy woman who does things better than you do, like I am. Phoebe will make you happy; she's someone you can take care of and protect and cherish. Can you imagine me needing to be taken care of and protected?"

"Well, no," Justin said, "Contrition, are you very upset?"

"I'm desolated," Contrition said. And she was. There it goes, she thought, all of it, everything I could have had. Justin and children and Maple Lane and all the Odets and a life that would

make any woman in her right mind happy. "But I'm strong, Justin. I'll get over it, in five or ten years. I'm sure you'll be very happy with Phoebe."

"How can I be happy with Phoebe? She's going to marry Myron Coverdale!" Justin broke out, desperate. He ran his fingers through his hair. He paced. He groaned. "She's engaged to him, and she'll marry him because there's no way out of it. and I don't know what to do because there isn't anything I can do."

"Phoebe loves you," Contrition said.

"She does?" Justin stopped his pacing. "Are you sure? I never thought, I never had any idea . . ."

"Of course she loves you. She worships you. And she isn't going to marry Myron Coverdale, she's going to marry you," Contrition said.

"But how? The Haywoods will never allow it!"

"Don't worry about it. I'm going to fix us some dinner; we missed ours and that was a long time ago, and I'm starved and you must be too. And early this evening, as soon as the Haywoods have had time to finish their supper, I'm going to visit them and I'll take care of everything. You'll stay right here and wait for me to come back and tell you that everything is all right."

"But how can you do that? I should go with you . . ."

"Don't you trust me? Don't I always do anything I set out to do? Stay here, Justin. If you get too nervous or impatient waiting, you can help Lotta pray. She'll pray for you, too; she's awfully good at praying. But you can't pray on an empty stomach, and I can't fix things for you on an empty stomach, so for pity sake go into the parlor and sit down and keep out from under my feet."

27

CONTRITION presented herself at the Haywood mansion directly after their dinner hour and asked to see Jewel alone. Jewel, her ears perking up, had herself carried up the stairs to her private apartments, while Elizabeth and John Haywood stared after them, wondering what this upstart young miss had to say to Jewel that she couldn't say in front of them.

Phoebe had left the drawing room and gone to her own room as soon as Contrition had been announced. She didn't want to see Dianna, she never wanted to see her again.

"Dratted stairs!" Jewel said when Oswald had deposited her at the top of them and she could proceed on her own. "One of these days, I'm going to be able to manage them on my own. I'd start trying right now, only I'm afraid I might fall and hurt myself again and then I'd miss all this fun. Well, girl, what do you want to see me about?"

"Justin is in love with Phoebe. He wants to marry her. I pulled it off but I can tell you that it wasn't easy! Of all the thick-headed, obtuse idiots in the world, Justin is the thickest-headed and the most obtuse. He's been in love with Phoebe for weeks, but there wasn't any way I could get it through his head that he was!"

"So he loves our little brown mouse," Jewel said. "And as she loves him; all that remains is for you to bring your father to ruin. The scandal will bring Phoebe's engagement to Myron Coverdale to an end, and Phoebe and Justin can be married and live happily ever after. Or as happily as Phoebe can live, with her father disgraced and her faith in her best friend shattered beyond redemption. You've

accomplished your goal, Contrition. I only wonder that you don't seem very happy about it."

"I'm not going to bring my father to ruin," Contrition said. She thought that the words were going to strangle her. It was all she could do to get them out. They actually tasted bitter. "I don't want any shadow over Phoebe's happiness. The Odets are nice, they'd probably let Justin marry her even if there was a scandal, but it would be bound to affect them as well as Phoebe, and other people might snub Phoebe and Justin because of our father, and Phoebe's going to have enough trouble coping with being happy without having to cope with anything else."

Jewel sat very straight in her chair, regarding her illegitimate granddaughter with curiosity. "If you aren't going to bring my son to ruin, how do you propose to accomplish the breaking up of Phoebe's engagement and then her marriage to Justin?"

"Just get your husband and your son and your daughter-in-law up here," Contrition said. "What I have to say to them has to be said behind closed doors. Not Phoebe. I don't want her to hear what I'm going to say, I don't want her to know anything about it. If things go as I think they'll go, she needn't ever know. I'll apologize to her for the things I said about Justin this morning, I'll tell her that I'll always love her, and I'll pack my bags and leave Albany and leave you to hold the fort, which I know perfectly well you can do."

"It would be nice to know what defenses the fort will have," Jewel said, her voice dry. "But I'll make do with whatever they are if you can pull this rabbit out of the hat."

"The hand is quicker than the eye," Contrition told her. "If you're ready, I'll go down and tell them that you want to see them immediately, on a matter of importance, up here in your room."

Taking a deep breath, steeling herself to play the most difficult role she'd ever have to play in her life, she went downstairs. She had stage fright, but she was determined that she wasn't going to let anyone, not even her grandmother, know it. Remember Jonathan, she told herself. Don't overplay it, don't emote, don't stalk around waving your arms and making dramatic gestures, just deliver your lines.

It was obvious that Jewel wasn't going to give her any help in

getting started. When John Haywood demanded, "What is it, Jewel?", Contrition's grandmother looked at Contrition, unsmiling, and said, "Ask Miss Verndon."

"Well, really!" Elizabeth Haywood exclaimed. "I cannot imagine that Miss Verndon could have anything of importance to say to us! I consider this summons quite unforgivable."

Contrition thought that it would be better to ignore Betty Haywood. Engaging in a verbal battle with the overbearing woman would gain her nothing. She stood in front of Gerald Haywood and looked him straight in the eye.

"Mr. Haywood, your father has remarked, on more than one occasion, that I reminded him of someone, but he couldn't put his finger on it. I want you to take a close look at me now, as well as your father, and see if you can puzzle out who it is that I resemble."

Gerald looked at her, nonplussed, and John Haywood's face was equally blank. They studied her face carefully, every detail of it, while Elizabeth Haywood fumed and murmured, "Impertinence! How dare a guest in our home behave toward us with such impertinence?"

Gerald Haywood shook his head. "You do remind me of someone, but I can't for the life of me think who it is." John Haywood evinced displeasure by frowning at her in so intimidating a manner that if Contrition had been made of lesser stuff, she would have taken to her heels.

"Look at your mother," Contrition told Gerald. She moved to stand beside Jewel, and both women, young and old, regarded him with their identical, steady blue eyes. "The resemblance is quite strong, don't you think? But that isn't remarkable. Granddaughters often resemble their grandmothers. Mrs. Haywood, would you mind showing your son the miniature made of you when you were about my age, the one you showed me some time ago?"

"It's in the top drawer of my chest of drawers," Jewel told her. "On the right, under the pile of handkerchiefs."

Contrition fetched it and handed it to Gerald. Gerald, his face perplexed, studied the miniature and then both Contrition's and Jewel's faces.

"Anyone could see the resemblance," Contrition said. "Show it to your father and see if he doesn't remark it, too."

"So that's it!" John Haywood barked, his face a thundercloud. "You discovered this superficial resemblance when my wife showed you the miniature, and you plotted and schemed to take advantage of the fancied resemblance! I don't believe for a moment that you are any relative of ours. If you think to profit by this attempted deception, you are doomed to disappointment. I will ask you to leave my house now and not return. Your friendship with my granddaughter and your using the Haywoods to gain an opening wedge into Albany's society have come to an end."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Haywood," Contrition said. "The resemblance is far from fancied. Jewel Haywood is my grandmother and you are my grandfather, although I'd a deal rather that you weren't. But I'm proud of every drop of my grandmother's blood that runs in my veins! And your son, Gerald Haywood, is my father. My natural father. Your son, my natural father, forced himself on my mother, Lelia, when she was a servant in this house. And you in turn forced her to marry Amos Reeves when she apprised you of the consequences of your son's act. Amos Reeves! You might as well have married her off to the devil! He made my mother's life a misery, abused her into an early death, and abused me until I was forced to run away from him and take refuge with a company of traveling thespians!"

"An actress!" John Haywood exploded. "That explains it! You're an actress, an adventuress, you've concocted this entire story for the purpose of blackmail! But it won't work, Miss Verndon. If you don't quit my premises immediately and quit Albany tomorrow, I'll see that you're imprisoned for attempted extortion!"

"You'll do no such thing," Jewel Haywood said. "Dianna is telling the unvarnished truth. She is my granddaughter, illegitimate or not, and a granddaughter I'm proud to acknowledge. And if you do not do exactly as she asks, I assure you that I will back up her story from every rooftop in Albany!"

"It can't be true!" Gerald Haywood exclaimed, his face showing a mixture of bewilderment and consternation. "I did mistake Lelia for Effie when I was under the influence of too much alcohol, but

there weren't any consequences. Lelia concocted that fabrication in order to demand payment so that she could marry Amos Reeves and they could purchase a farm."

"That's what your father told you," Contrition said. "It isn't true. There were consequences. I was the consequence. And my mother didn't want to marry Amos Reeves; she hated him and feared him. It was your father who forced her into the marriage by threatening to have her put into prison for attempted blackmail if she dared to tell the truth about who had fathered the child she was carrying. With his influence and his wealth, he could have done it; he left no doubt of that."

"But Father swore to me that there were no consequences!"

"Your father lied," Jewel told him. "He lied to you and he lied to me. I suspected at the time that he was lying. God knows, lying is one of the things he does best, lying and cheating to his own advantage, as what he did to my family proves without any shadow of a doubt. But I was not well; I was crippled and confined to these rooms, and your father kept Lelia from me. He sent you away so that neither Lelia nor I could contact you and tell you the truth. That is only one of my husband's sins, but not one of the minor ones."

Gerald turned to Contrition. "Miss Verndon, Dianna . . ."

"Don't call me Dianna," Contrition said. "My name is Contrition."

"Dianna, Contrition . . . I would have married your mother if I'd known! But Father told me that she was lying, that he'd handle everything, that he'd pay the blackmail in order to eliminate the nuisance she could have caused, that it was worth the money to be rid of a troublemaker."

His distress was real. In all the years that Contrition had planned to bring Gerald Haywood to ruin, she had never imagined that his distress would be real when he learned that she was his daughter, come to face him with the consequences of his acts. She'd never imagined that he would have married her mother if he'd known the truth. Gerald Haywood was a handsome, weak man, led by his domineering father, a puppet on a string, but he wasn't evil; there was no real evil in him, only the weakness that had led directly to her own birth.

"Miss Verndon, I'm sorry, I don't know what to say, there's been a dreadful injustice . . ."

"Gerald, please be quiet. The fact remains that even if what Miss Verndon claims and what my wife seems to have chosen to verify is true, this young woman has come to Albany and has insinuated herself into our family circle for the sole purpose of blackmail. I suppose I'll have to pay again, just as I paid her mother, to get rid of her. How much do you want, Miss Verndon, what sum do you have in mind? It will be paid over, provided that you sign an agreement that you will accept it as payment in full, so that you can never again dare approach us with demands for more."

"I don't want a penny," Contrition said. "There isn't enough money in the world to pay for what Amos Reeves did to my mother and me."

"Then it's revenge. You've come to ruin us!" John Haywood said.

"That's exactly why I came," Contrition agreed with maddening good humor. "I came to bring my father to ruin."

"A vindictive, ruthless woman! You'll ruin my name, my son, my wife, and my grandchildren, in order to exact your revenge!"

"I'm not going to do that, either. I was going to, but I've changed my mind," Contrition told him. "My price is simple, Grandfather, but it's high. Phoebe isn't to marry Myron Coverdale. He's a skunk. She's to marry Justin Odets. He's nice. He's so nice that she'll be happy for all the rest of her life. That's all I want and I mean to get it."

"Impossible! Engagements cannot be broken; this marriage has been planned for years. The Coverdales are an influential and wealthy family, they'll further my son's career, they'll help place him in the governor's mansion! If you think for one moment that I'll bow to your preposterous demands, you are very much mistaken!"

"In that case, I will attend Mr. Charles Grandison Finney's next meeting, and I will be moved to throw myself at the seat of mercy and confess that I came to Albany to bring my natural father to ruin. In front of the entire congregation, and I understand that half of Albany and a quarter of the county will be there, I will pour out the entire story and beg for forgiveness, not only for myself but for my

father, Gerald Haywood. Charles Grandison Finney has brought worse sinners than me to public confession, Grandfather. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and my sin was grievous because I wished to exact my own revenge, and only Mr. Finney's inspiring words caused me to repent my sin and confess my fault and beg for everlasting mercy!"

John Haywood stared at his illegitimate granddaughter with consternation. "Nobody will believe you. I'll let it be known that you're demented."

"And I'll let it be known that Contrition told nothing but the truth!" Jewel said. "You're getting off easy, John. If I were in Contrition's shoes, I wouldn't let you off so easily, you can be assured of that! Phoebe is going to marry Justin Odets. He's nice. He's so nice that she'll be happy for all the rest of her life." Jewel, Contrition thought with warm approval, was a quick study and she would have made a magnificent actress; it was a shame that the boards had lost her.

"You'll do no such thing! I am the master of this house, and if you persist in making such ridiculous statements, I will confine you to your rooms so that you will have access to no one!"

"And Justin Odets and I will tell everyone that you're holding your wife prisoner, and why," Contrition said. "After her recent emergence back into society, where all of Albany has seen that she is in the best of both physical and mental health, don't you think that keeping her confined would raise a lot of questions in people's minds? Only they won't have to wonder about it because Justin already knows the entire story and he will back me to the limit."

"Young Odets knows?" For once, John Haywood was taken aback. "You've told him and he's willing to back you up?"

"Justin will do anything I tell him to do," Contrition told him. "Justin's used to doing what I tell him to do. And he isn't the only one who knows the entire story, Mr. Haywood. I hope you don't mind if I don't call you Grandfather? I'm not very proud to have you for a grandfather. The Olympians know, all of them. And one of Justin's best friends knows." Well, Henry Davenport was one of Justin's best friends, wasn't he? They'd made that pretty clear while Justin had been with the Olympians. "This is your chance for real fame, Mr. Haywood! Do you think for a moment that Mrs. Ethel

May Creighton won't believe us? She regards me as her dearest friend, she's taken me under her wing, and she'll be only too delighted to champion me, as I am sure you know."

"John, you might as well give up. Contrition has you and she isn't going to let go until she gets what she wants. Gerald, I'm afraid that you'll never take up residence in the governor's mansion, but I'm of the opinion that that's for the best. You would have been a handsome figurehead, but your father would have been the actual governor, manipulating everything for his own gain and that of his friends."

"Not be governor!" This was a blow, a real blow. Gerald Haywood had counted on being governor of the state of New York. He would have liked it. People would have looked up to him. And Elizabeth had her heart set on it.

Elizabeth was livid. Elizabeth was very near to going into a fit such as sinners went into at Charles Grandison Finney's meetings. Elizabeth's face had taken on the color of a piece of fresh-cut liver, and her massive body shook so hard that her clothing vibrated.

"Father, you aren't going to let this little upstart get away with this? I won't allow it! Of course Gerald is going to be governor!"

"No, he isn't," Jewel said. "That's part of the bargain. It would be an honor to be the governor's mother, but I confess that I'm the one who's making that stipulation."

"Gerald, I love you dearly, even if you aren't as strong in your convictions as you should be. But my husband is not going to be the governor's father and that's all there is to it. He stole my father's fortune and cheated my brothers and sister, and he's cheated other people out of their fortunes through crooked business dealings, and he ruined you, and now he's trying to ruin Phoebe's life. There's got to be an end to it."

Contrition had come to Albany for revenge, to bring her father to ruin, but it was Jewel who was enacting revenge on the man who had dominated her for all of her married life and under whose injustices she had suffered.

"Go to it, Grandmother!" Contrition said, her eyes shining. "I'm proud to be your granddaughter, even if I never will get to tell

anybody." She bent to kiss Jewel's cheek, and Jewel reached up to take her hand and hold it.

"If I had to have an illegitimate granddaughter, I'm glad that it turned out to be you," she said. "If you and your Olympians ever play in Albany, I'm going to be in one of the front seats and lead the applause!"

"We'll play in Albany," Contrition promised her. "But you'll have a hard time recognizing me! I always play the parts of boys. Be sure and clap hard for me! And you can treat the troupe to supper after the performance and get to meet all the Olympians. My Lotta's one of them, and you'll like Dolly Burnside; once you meet her, you'll know for sure that neither Lotta nor I have ever been compromised by any overenthusiastic gentleman in the audience. Dolly'd break their heads if they tried to get near us! You and Dolly will get along, Grandmother. I can hardly wait for you to meet her!"

Elizabeth Haywood's face went from the color of fresh-cut liver to that of stale flour-paste. Her mother-in-law consorting with thespians! She'd be disgraced, she'd never be able to hold her head up again! And Jewel would do it, Elizabeth knew she would; the old lady's eyes were already shining with anticipation. Elizabeth Haywood put her hand over her mouth and rushed from the room before she retched in front of all of them, and she just barely made it to her own room and the slop basin.

Jewel watched her daughter-in-law's precipitate exit, her face registering satisfaction.

"I'll do just that, Contrition," she said. "I'm as anxious to meet your Dolly and the rest of the Olympians as you are to have me meet them. And after that, there'll be no question that my son could ever be the governor of New York State! Nobody would vote for a man whose mother consortied with thespians, even though it's well known that I'm an eccentric and no one will snub me because of it. I can carry it off with flying colors, and won't I enjoy the embarrassment it will cause John!"

John Haywood made a strangling noise in his throat and followed his daughter-in-law from the room, although with considerably more dignity. Only Gerald remained, his face torn with conflicting emotions.

"Miss Verndon, Dianna, Contrition, would it be all right if I

attended the performance as well? I'd like to meet this Dolly you speak of, who sheltered and protected you. And I've always had an interest in the stage."

Contrition and Jewel looked at each other, their faces filled with amusement.

"It's all right with me, if you can face being given a good lashing-out by Dolly! Even I won't be able to hold her back from telling you what she thinks of you!" Contrition said.

Gerald's face fell. "Oh. Well. Perhaps I'd better not attend the performance or the late supper afterwards, after all. Father wouldn't like it."

I'm glad I'll never have to acknowledge him as my father, Contrition thought, filled with contempt for his weakness.

It was all over but the shouting. She'd won, she'd got what it had turned out that she wanted. It was funny that she didn't feel more triumphant.

"I'm going to go and tell Phoebe that she isn't going to marry Myron Coverdale, that she's going to marry Justin," Contrition said. "I'll see you later, Grandmother." She kissed Jewel's cheek again and hurried to Phoebe's room.

Phoebe's door was closed. Contrition knocked, but there was no answer. She knocked again, calling out, and when there was still no answer, she pushed the door open.

Phoebe wasn't in her room. She wasn't downstairs, either. Some of Phoebe's clothes were missing. And Contrition, with a sudden feeling of doom, rushed outside and found that Zeus and the buggy were gone from where she had hitched Zeus to the hitching post in front of the house. Phoebe had run away!

Contrition stood there, her heart pounding. Dang her little brown mouse of a one half of a sister! Why had she had to wait for this moment when everything was all fixed for her to work up some gumption?

She heard a horse and buggy approaching and she turned, her heart leaping. Phoebe had had second thoughts after all, she hadn't had the courage to go through with it. But it wasn't Zeus pulling the buggy that was bearing down on her, it was Senaca, with Justin

driving. Having come to the end of his patience, Justin had decided to drive to the Haywoods' and see what was going on.

Contribution scrambled into the buggy before he could bring Senaca to a stop. "Give me those ribbons!" Contribution said. "Phoebe's run off, and we have to catch her!"

"With Zeus?" Justin's face went white. "She'll never be able to handle him; she'll end up in a ditch with her neck broken! And where on earth would she be running to?"

"To you, to Maple Lane, you dolt!" Contribution snapped at him. "Where else could she go? And Zeus won't overturn her, he wouldn't dream of doing such a thing; he likes her!"

"We'll never be able to catch up with her! Senaca isn't anywhere near as fast!" Justin said, frantic.

"Don't forget that it's Phoebe driving Zeus, and me driving Senaca! Now shut up and hang on!" Contribution said.

Justin had never dreamed that Senaca could trot as fast as he trotted for Contribution. He was thankful that he'd fed and watered Senaca at Contribution's rented house and that the horse had had a good rest. Senaca trotted, his feet flying, never missing a beat. They bowled through the streets, with two or three other vehicles veering wildly to get out of their way, and took to the road that led toward Maple Lane, with Senaca outdoing himself and enjoying every minute of it.

Even so, it was a full three-quarters of an hour before they saw the buggy a good distance ahead of them. Contribution grinned. It would be fun to make a race of it, to see if she could get enough speed out of Senaca to overtake Zeus and outdistance him once Zeus realized that it was a race. But she didn't dare do that, with Phoebe at Zeus's ribbons.

She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. Ahead of them, Zeus came to an abrupt stop, and all of Phoebe's flicking him with the ribbons and begging didn't move him to move.

Phoebe was crying when they came up with her, but they were tears of fury as much as of grief. "I'm not going back! You can't make me go back! I know it was wrong to take Zeus, but I knew he'd take me to Maple Lane, and I was going to beg Mr. Odets to take me to one of his sisters' houses and beg her to shelter me until I

could make my way somewhere where I could find work and never have to come back and marry Myron Coverdale! I can be a mill mechanic, or a househussy! Mr. Odets, you'll do it, won't you? You'll help me get away so I won't have to marry Myron Coverdale?"

"Glory be," Contrition said. "I'm beginning to think you have some of your grandmother's spunk, after all. Justin, help her out of that buggy and into this one. I'll take Zeus back. Phoebe, stop that crying. You aren't going to marry Myron Coverdale, you're going to marry Justin. It's all settled."

"It is?" Justin said, astonished.

"Yes, it is! Now take Phoebe home and go and tell Jewel that her granddaughter has some spunk, after all! I wouldn't try to talk to John Haywood tonight if I were you, Justin, but you can take my word for it that it's all settled. Tomorrow you can begin courting Phoebe. There won't be any trouble; Jewel and I have seen to that. Phoebe, don't you dare go fainting! Don't you dare!"

It wouldn't have mattered all that much if Phoebe had fainted because Justin already had her in his arms. But Phoebe decided not to faint because if she fainted she'd miss feeling Justin holding her in his arms. Her own arms moved and clasped him around his neck and clung.

"All right, you two lovesick idiots! Get along home!" Contrition commanded. "You don't have any chaperone, and you can't start your courtship with a scandal."

She climbed up behind Zeus and took up the ribbons, turning him neatly. She was a blithering idiot. Tonight, all within a couple of hours, she had given up everything she could have had or could ever hope to have. All the same, she thought that being a blithering idiot was almost as good as being an actress. Tonight had been her finest performance. It was a pity that the audience had been so small.

At home, she found Lotta asleep on her knees in their bedroom, her head resting on the edge of the bed. Dear Lotta, dear good Lotta! Gently, she shook Lotta's shoulder.

"I'm ready to pray with you now," she said. "And I've given up bringing my father to ruin, so you can pray with a clear conscience. Lotta, don't you dare cry! Here your prayers have been answered even before I prayed with you, so there's no reason to cry!"

"I knew my prayers would be answered, I just knew it! Mr. Finney showed me the light, he showed me the way! Now, if only we weren't actresses, we could both be saved!"

Contrition was in Jewel's bedroom, just the two of them.

"I'm going to miss you," Contrition told her grandmother. "I'm going to miss you like the dickens."

"And I'll miss you. Contrition, I have something for you. It isn't much but I hope it will serve as a remembrance." She placed a small pendant in Contrition's hand. It was an opal, the stone not large at all but with a beautiful fire.

"It isn't valuable. John never believed in investing money in anything that wouldn't bring him a handsome return," Jewel said. "I wish I had more to give you, but the few other pieces I have will have to go to my daughters. Justin will no doubt see that Phoebe has all the jewels she wants, although I doubt that she'll want any at all except an engagement and wedding ring. My oldest sister gave me this opal for my sixteenth birthday. There are those who say opals are bad luck, but all the bad luck must have been used up out of this one over the years I've had it, before you came into my life and broke the cycle. Now we can hope that it holds good luck for you."

"It's already given me luck. It's given me you," Contrition said.

"And you've saved Phoebe from a life of misery and given me back my own," Jewel told her. Her eyes were filled with tears, but her peppery spirit wouldn't let her admit it. "And don't think that you haven't had your revenge on your father! Maybe you didn't bring him to ruin, but he's been punished all the same because he'll never be governor. And even more, his father is being punished."

"And so it should be!" Contrition's eyes were snapping. "He was really the guilty one! I hope he suffers and suffers!"

"Vindictive little miss, aren't you?" Jewel asked.

"No, it's just that fair's fair."

The next day Contrition and Lotta boarded a packet to take them to Syracuse. The Olympians would be getting ready for their new season, and there was no point to staying in Albany any longer.

Phoebe drove them in the buggy, despite her mother's and her grandfather's protests that she would have to drive back alone.

Contribution's little brown mouse of a one half of a sister had found a good deal of self-confidence and courage since she'd escaped having to marry Myron Coverdale and since she'd finally been convinced that Justin loved her; they were going to be married in the early autumn, as soon as decency would allow.

"Dianna, are you sure that your heart isn't broken? All this time, I thought that you and Justin loved each other. We all thought that he was courting you. I still can't believe that he loves me instead of you! You're so capable, you're so brave, it just doesn't seem reasonable that he'd prefer me to you!"

"Phoebe, I'm going to tell you something. Don't go around being capable and brave for Justin. He loves you just the way you are; he wants to be the brave and capable one. He admired me because I could handle Zeus, but as sure as the sun's going to rise tomorrow morning, he would have begun to resent it before much more time had passed.

"Men are peculiar creatures, Phoebe. When a man's made a fool of himself in front of a woman, he's apt to turn against her because he can't stand having her know that he isn't brave and capable and perfect. Justin fell out of love with me and in love with you because it began to irk him because he thought that I was more capable than he was. It was bound to happen, even if you hadn't been in the picture. He would have been miserable with me. He'd have been the henpecked husband because I'm bossy, and I wouldn't have been able to help henpecking him when he did something stupid. Don't you go making that same mistake!"

"There's just one thing. When you go out driving, if you take Zeus, ask him very prettily if you can drive! He can't handle Zeus worth shucks. Zeus'll never act up with you, he just likes to tease Justin. But don't let Justin know that you know that he can't handle him! Let him be the big, brave man, indulging his sweet, helpless little wife."

"It doesn't seem quite honest." Phoebe looked doubtful. She wanted to be honest with Justin; it wasn't in her to be devious.

Contribution laughed. "Phoebe, if women were always honest with men, no man would ever marry one! It isn't being dishonest, it's

being smart for the sake of future generations! You do as I say, and you and Justin will be happier than any mortals have a right to be."

The two girls embraced. Contrition had an overwhelming longing to tell Phoebe that she was her sister. But she and Jewel had been all over that, and they decided that Phoebe mustn't know, at least not for years, until she was mature and confident enough to be able to absorb the shock of her father's perfidy without it shattering her. Some day, when Phoebe was middle-aged and had a houseful of children, Contrition might tell her, but not until then.

"You'll write to me? You promised that you'd write to me!" Phoebe said, choking.

"You can count on it. I'll write to you every chance I get, from wherever I am." She'd already told Phoebe that she was going to travel around the country, that she was tired of farm life and she was going to go places and do things before she was too old to enjoy it. That would account for her letters coming from different places around the state.

She refused to let her tears run over. She kissed Phoebe one last time and promised again that she'd be back for Phoebe's wedding in the fall, and then she scurried to board the packet where Lotta was hopping up and down, fretting that it would start without her.

It was an empty feeling, having this phase of her life over. Bringing her father to ruin had been her goal for so long that, now that it was over, she felt bereft. She almost felt as though she were in limbo, waiting for another goal that would give her life direction.

But when you can't go back; the only direction to go is forward. Squaring her shoulders and her chin, Contrition faced the front of the packet as it took her toward whatever was in store for her in the future.

28

THE new season did not start off auspiciously for the Olympians. Their coffers were alarmingly low, since it cost money to winter over and they had played only a few times in Syracuse, with part or all of their renumeration being in meals rather than in hard cash. This being the case, Anton decided that they'd start out a little earlier this year and chance being bogged down on the muddy roads that had not yet completely dried up after the winter snows. At least the grass was growing so they wouldn't have to pay to feed the horses.

And they weren't likely to go hungry, because Dianna, praise the Lord, had come back from Albany safe and sound and all in one piece, her natural father and her grandfather having failed to annihilate her in spite of all their fears for her safety, a little girl like that putting herself against such wealthy and ruthless men.

Dolly had hardly stopped crying yet, she was so relieved that Dianna and Lotta were back. Her tears of relief reddened her eyes and made her face puffy, even during all the time Dianna told them everything that had happened, down to the last, least detail, with the rest of them always probing for more in case she might have forgotten something.

Dolly was ecstatic because her two wandering lambs were back. Anton beamed. Jonathan Yeats wiped furtively at his eyes although he declared that he'd never doubted for a moment that Dianna would accomplish what she had set out to do and come out of it unscathed. Gavin didn't care much one way or the other, except that Dianna made herself so useful and he would have missed the provender she supplied when otherwise there would have been no supper. Elmer

Tibbs was nearly as gratified as Dolly and Anton were. And that left only Evangeline.

"I never heard of such insanity in my life!" Vangie said, her beautiful face filled with scorn. "There you had Justin wrapped around your little finger, he would have married you even if you'd disgraced yourself bringing your father to ruin, and you were stupid enough to hand him over to this ninny of a half sister of yours instead!"

"Phoebe isn't a ninny. Phoebe is sweet and kind, and she loved Justin before I'd ever seen him! And I couldn't let her marry Myron Coverdale, could I? She never could have survived it. Myron Coverdale's a skunk."

"All right, so you were noble! Stupid but noble. But you were twice as stupid not to get something from the Haywoods for keeping your mouth shut. With all their money and with what you had on them, they'd have paid through the nose! You could be rich right now, but no, you walked away with nothing at all!"

"I didn't go there to blackmail them. I went there to ruin them. That doesn't mean that I'd stoop to blackmail."

"They owe it to you!" Evangeline raged. "If I'd been in your place with your opportunity, you can believe that I wouldn't have walked away empty-handed!"

"Vangie, that's a dreadful thing to say! I wish that you could hear Mr. Charles Grandison Finney speak; he'd bring you to salvation and you wouldn't have such wicked thoughts any more!" Lotta said, her face filled with consternation. "Listening to Mr. Finney was a revelation! Just listening to him gave my prayers the power to keep Dianna from forfeiting her immortal soul, that's how powerful a speaker he is!"

"You," Evangeline told the younger actress, "are a nitwit. And so is Dianna. I'm disgusted with both of you." And she turned her back on them, giving her full attention to the squirrel stew that Contrition had provided, not only bringing down the squirrels but preparing their evening meal at the campsite. "Jody, finish your stew. We'll likely go hungry in the morning."

"You won't go hungry," Contrition told her. "I'll see to that. I've set rabbit snares."

"I'm tired of squirrel and rabbit," Jody said. "I'm tired of

camping out and staying at those silly inns and watching your silly plays. I want to go home!"

"Well, you can't go home! Why won't you realize that and stop complaining? I've taken good care of you, you've never gone hungry or shabby. I'm your mother!" Evangeline said.

"I wish you weren't my mother! I don't want an actress for a mother! Actresses are wicked! Fathers live in houses and send their sons to school," Jody said, his face ugly.

"You're learning more than you'd learn in school; Mr. Yeats knows more than any of those teachers!" Evangeline pointed out, exasperated. "He's taught you your letters, and how to read and write and figure, and geography and history, and he'll even teach you Latin! What more could you want?"

"I want my father and I want to live in a house. His house!" Jody said, his lower lip thrust out, his look at his mother poisonous.

Evangeline rose from her place at the campfire and put a handkerchief to her eyes and hurried to the Conniewagon she shared with the two younger girls, determined that she wouldn't let Jody see that he had made her cry again.

"She's crying, you've made her cry!" Lotta told Jody, looking at him accusingly. "She's a good mother to you! You shouldn't go hurting her feelings and making her cry!"

"You're stupid. All actresses are stupid!" Jody said. He finished his stew. "Ugh! This stew is awful!"

"And you're a skunk," Contrition told him. "If Vangie had any sense, she'd turn you over her knee and give you the walloping you deserve!"

Jody stared at her unblinkingly. "She wouldn't dare!" he said. "I'd run away if she did and she'd never see me again and when I found my father he'd punish her!"

"If he ever laid a hand on her, he'd have me to contend with, and he'd wish he'd never been born!" Contrition snarled back at him. Her voice was so fierce that for once Jody backed off. It was a good thing, too, because Contrition was on the point of giving him the larruping that Vangie was afraid to give him. She glared after him as he melted into the gathering dusk, and then turned back to the others. Jody wouldn't go far. He talked big but he wasn't all that

brave. He'd be afraid to wander far from the camp after dark for fear that a bear would get him, or a wolf.

"Have you heard anything from Henry?" She tried to make the question casual, as if she didn't care one way or the other.

"Not a word. I hope that that bounty hunter didn't get him!" Dolly said.

"But what did he do? Why would a bounty hunter be after him?" Contrition demanded, her stomach wishing that it wasn't so full of stew.

"I don't know. None of us knows. We only know he took to his heels that time when you were abducted and he had to drive for you in the race, and the puke saw him, and Elmer saw the puke see him and ran to warn him, and Henry was off and running."

"He can't be a criminal! I'll never believe that he's a thief or anything like that!" Contrition thrust her chin out. "He may be a lot of other things but he's not a criminal!"

"I don't think so, either. But you can never tell, Dianna. He had to have some reason to run, and it's certainly peculiar that he ran off again right after he came back."

It had been well over a week now since Contrition had rejoined the Olympians, but she couldn't stop worrying about Henry, even if she did hate him. What if he'd been taken? What if he was languishing in prison somewhere? Maybe he was even in Auburn prison! But Dolly said that he wasn't. "Elmer asked," Dolly told her. "There's nobody of that name or description there. Wherever he is, we can only hope and trust that he got away."

Only what if he hadn't. Maybe he was dead! Maybe he'd been hung! Bounty hunters didn't make a business of tracking down men who hadn't done something dreadful enough so they'd have a price on their heads.

Drat him, Contrition thought. Drat him, drat him! He might have told her! He knew she'd never give him away, he'd known he could trust her!

Only he hadn't liked her enough to tell her. She just simply didn't mean enough to him for him to take her into his confidence.

Drat him! Contrition cried silently while she pounded on her pillow at night, sleep eluding her because of her worrying about

him. Drat him, she cried silently, the moment she opened her eyes in the morning and remembered that he was still missing, that he hadn't had the common human kindness to send any kind of word even to Dolly and Anton who were his friends. It made her victory in Albany seem hollow, even if she was happy for Phoebe and ecstatic because she'd found Jewel.

I won't think about him any more. Contrition told herself, squaring her chin. He isn't worth thinking about. You can bet your brand-new boots that he isn't thinking about me! I hope he never comes back, I hope I never see him again! If he ever does come back, I'll leave the troupe! I'll go to New York City, that's what I'll do, and I'll find Mr. Tyrone Power and I'll be a famous actress and I'll never think of Henry Davenport again as long as I live, and if he comes begging me to take him back, I'll tell him I don't remember him, I'll laugh in his face!

To reach Cayuga Village, they had to pass over the longest bridge in the world, across the marshes. Anton paid the toll grudgingly because paying it all but emptied the coffers, but there was no help for it.

Vangie complained bitterly about the mosquitoes and the smells that emanated from the marshes and swore for the thousandth time that she would seize the first opportunity to quit this threadbare troupe and join another, more prosperous one. "I could have been as great as Mrs. Austin or Miss Fisher if only I'd gone to New York City instead of joining the Olympians!" Evangeline lamented. "No doubt I'd be playing opposite Mr. Tyrone Power tonight, in a real theatre, receiving standing ovations, the Great Lady of the Theatre! Not having my face turned into a mass of welts by these horrible mosquitoes and gnats and not even sure if we'll take in enough at the gate to spend the night in a proper inn instead of having to camp out again! If only I hadn't had to go vagabonding around the country in order to keep out of Dermont's clutches, I could have had it all!"

"Whatever made you think of Mr. Dimwiddle?" Lotta asked.

"It's Jody! He's just like his father, it drives me frantic! Always carping at me, forever carping at me!"

"I wouldn't carp at you if you weren't an actress," Jody told her

sourly. "Mothers are supposed to be decent, upstanding housewives and stay at home and cook and clean and take care of their husbands and children."

"Right out of his father's mouth!" Vangie said despairingly. "That man ruined my life! It isn't as if I ever wanted to marry him in the first place. I knew how it would be, but my mother and my father and my sisters forced me into it. My mother thought I was destined for hades because I was so pretty, and so did my father, and my sisters hated me because they weren't as pretty as I was. Just because I liked to have a good time and all the young men admired me, they chose Dermont P. Dimwiddle for me. He was so staid and sour that they thought that he could hold me down. Nobody ever loved me. I might have found a man who would love me if they'd given me a chance, but they pushed me into marrying Dermont when I was too young to defend myself, and if I hadn't finally found the courage to run away from him, I'd have gone stark, raving mad! Even the Olympians are better than having to live with him!" Evangeline covered her face with her hands and began to cry, and for once Contrition thoroughly sympathized with her. Vangie might be maddening sometimes, but she hadn't had a happy life and she never would have as long as Jody hated her the way he did.

Fortunately, once they entered the village, things began looking up. Elmer had posted their banner in front of an inn, and the innkeeper was a jolly man, greeting them warmly and promising them a large turnout if as many people as he anticipated came to see their offering, eager to break the monotony of the long winter and the backbreaking work of spring. The Olympians were the first real entertainment to come to Cayuga Village for months, and there was sure to be a large crowd.

"How can I play Juliet tonight with my face in this condition? There isn't enough paint in the world to cover these bites!" Vangie complained. Her complaints weren't without merit. Vangie's face was mottled with swollen red spots and her eyes were swollen half-shut.

"Lie down and rest," Contrition coaxed her. "I'll soak a rag in cold water and witch hazel and put it on your face. That will help, it

always does. And Dolly will be able to cover what's left of the marks."

"Whoever heard of Juliet with a pockmarked face? I'll be laughed at, it will be ludicrous!" Evangeline wasn't to be comforted.

Jonathan Yeats regarded her critically. "I believe you are right, Miss La Lune. You really won't be presentable by this evening. But all is not lost. Dianna is versed in the role, she'll go on for you, and you can play Juliet's mother, with your face half-hidden by a headdress."

Evangeline's swollen eyes opened as wide as the swelling would permit and her face registered horrified shock.

"Dianna, play Juliet? Impossible! She's as green as grass, we'd be laughed out of town, it would be a mercy if we weren't pelted with rotten eggs! No, I'll go on, I always go on, I'm an artiste, the play must go on no matter the vicissitudes of fate! Dianna indeed!" If Jonathan had suggested to Contrition to play Juliet in order to persuade Vangie to go on, his ruse had worked. All the same, he looked a little pained. It would have been refreshing to see Dianna play Juliet. To put it as kindly as possible. Evangeline was getting a little overblown for the part.

Contrition went to see to the stabling of the horses, never satisfied that the hostlers would take proper care of them unless she was there to see that they did it right. Having satisfied herself that the beasts were comfortable and well fed, she knelt down to put her arms around Joyful who had been relegated to the stables. Joyful's eyes were mournful because he wan't allowed to follow Contrition into the inn, even though he delighted in guarding the horses and wagons.

"Never mind, Joyful. I'll bring you a bowl of scraps that will make your eyes bug out! And I'll come to see you again after the performance. Be a good dog now, and don't go barking and making people think you're vicious! Some folks just don't realize how friendly and gentle you are, and it wouldn't do for you to get any of our patrons angry with us."

The moment she entered the inn, she realized that bedlam had broken out during her absence. Vangie, her face pale even underneath the insect bites, was screeching her lungs out, lunging at a

man who held Jody firmly with one arm and fended her off with the other. Not that Jody needed holding. Jody was behind the stranger, peering out at his mother with a look of vicious triumph on his face.

"Give him back! You can't have him, he's my son!"

"You don't deserve a son! From this moment on, he's no son of yours!"

Contrition was no dimwit. It took her less than an instant to realize that what Evangeline had feared ever since she'd run away from her husband had finally come to pass. Dermont P. Dimwiddle had found her, and he was reclaiming his son.

"I am his mother! A child's place is with his mother!"

"You're an actress! I couldn't credit my ears when an acquaintance told me that he'd seen you, brazen and shameless, behind the footlights! An actress, a harlot, a bona-roba! Jody is mine and I'll make sure that you'll never see him again!"

"He'll make sure that you'll never see me again!" Jody echoed, his voice filled with spiteful satisfaction.

Dermont P. Dimwiddle was a tall man, a thin man, a man with a humorless, thin face, a man with cold eyes the color of dirty ice behind thick spectacles that magnified their coldness. To Contrition's way of thinking, he probably hadn't smiled since he was a baby and somebody had tickled his toes, if he'd smiled even then.

"Then I'll come, too!" Evangeline's voice was a wail of anguish. There was no one in the troupe who didn't realize the extent of her anguish, to be willing to go back to Dermont P. Dimwiddle in order to be near her son.

"You will not. You may consider yourself fortunate that I am not going to have you arrested for kidnapping my son, and thrown in prison. I would do just that, except for the vile publicity that would ensue and the casting of shame on my name and Jody's that would cling to us for life. But if you ever attempt to see him again, I will take that chance!"

"I'm going home with my father! I'll live in our house, I'll go to school!" Jody said. No child in the world should ever have looked at his mother the way Jody was looking at Vangie. "My father and I don't want you."

Dermont P. Dimwiddle looked at his son approvingly. The two of

them, Contrition thought, deserved each other! She only hoped that Jody would grow up and marry a woman who would make his life a misery. All the same, Vangie was suffering. Contrition's heart wrenched to see her. Lotta had her arm around her on one side and Dolly on the other. Dolly was speechless with outrage but Lotta wasn't.

"You can't call Vangie those things! It isn't true! She isn't what you said! Vangie's good, she's good and kind and generous . . ." Lotta broke off, even her sweet nature quailing at stretching the truth that far.

"You're a skunk!" Contrition shouted at Dermont P. Dimwiddle. "I've seen four-legged skunks and two-legged skunks, and I'll choose the four-legged kind to you any day! No wonder Vangie ran away from you! I'd run away from you too, dadblast you, any woman would run away from you! Vangie, don't cry. You're better off without Jody, he's just like his father, you're a whole lot better off without him!"

"I know I am, but it doesn't matter!" Evangeline's words were a wail of despair. "I'll die without him!"

"Then go ahead and die," Dermont P. Dimwiddle said, his voice as remorseless as his face and eyes. "It would be a blessing to Jody and me; then we wouldn't have to spend the rest of our lives in shame because of what you are!"

Contrition sprang at him, her fingers like claws. Her fingernails raked his face. Not satisfied with that, she kicked him. She was only sorry that she'd already taken off the heavy boots she'd worn in the Conniewagon in case they got bogged down. Even so, Dermont P. Dimwiddle flinched, and he spat out, "Another harlot!"

Anton's arms went around her, pinning her own to her sides, as she made to launch herself at Dermont P. Dimwiddle again, this time with the intent of inflicting a deal more damage than she had in her first assault. Struggle as she might, she couldn't get loose from Anton's bearlike grip.

"No, Dianna, no!" Jonathan told her. "You'll only cause more trouble. There's nothing we can do. The law is entirely on Mr. Dimwiddle's side, and if you were to inflict any real damage on him,

he would be entirely within his rights to have you arrested and incarcerated behind bars."

"I don't care! It would be worth it, just to give him a small portion of what he deserves!" Contrition raged.

"Come, Jody," Dermont P. Dimwiddle said with frozen dignity. "We're leaving. Never mind getting your other clothes; I'd only be obliged to burn them, contaminated as they are from their contact with this woman and the rest of this ungodly troupe!"

Jody marched beside his father, his head high, righteous satisfaction in every line of him. The little ingrate!, Contrition thought, seething. She, for one, would be glad to be rid of him because there was no hope for him that she could see; he'd been born a humorless, self-righteous old man, the image of his father. But that didn't mean that Vangie wasn't suffering and that she wouldn't go on suffering. Jody was all she had, as unsatisfactory as he was.

Dermont P. Dimwiddle's buggy was hitched outside. He lifted Jody in, climbed in after him, and the horse started off.

Only when they'd clattered out of the inn courtyard did Anton release his hold on Contrition. Like a flash, she was out the door and running to the stables, with Lotta at her heels.

"Sic him Joyful, sic him!" Contrition cried, pointing after the buggy.

Joyful was only too ready to oblige, but Lotta threw herself on the dog bodily and held him down. "No, no! You'll only make things worse! And if Joyful jumped into the buggy and bit Mr. Dimwiddle, he'd probably shoot him!"

Crying with rage, both girls watched the buggy turn a corner and disappear from sight. Even from where they were, they could hear Vangie sobbing, and the sound tore at their hearts. Men! Contrition thought, so indignant that she felt that she was going to burst with it. They always had everything their own way, and it behooved any woman to watch out for them and protect herself by any means she could. At least Phoebe had got herself a good man, but Justin was an exception; there weren't many like him. Anton and Mr. Yeats were nice, too, but as for all the rest of the male gender, she'd as lief never have to have anything to do with them for as long as she went on living.

Cayuga Village being the size it was, which was hardly any size at all, the contretemps at the inn reached every niche and corner of it before half and hour had passed. The landlord, so jolly and friendly when they'd arrived, looked at the thespians coldly.

"I'll have to ask you to leave my inn. If I were to allow you to play here tonight, the townspeople would probably tear the place apart. A woman stealing a child from his father! We don't hold with things like that, we're decent people here! If I were you, I'd get back on my wagons and get out of town as fast as I could!"

The wisdom of the innkeeper's advice was already evident. Townspeople were gathering, catcalling and hurling insults. Insults weren't all they hurled as the troupe made haste to retrieve their wagons. Contrition helped the hostler harness up, working faster than she'd ever worked before. They rolled out of town under a barrage of rotting vegetables and overripe eggs, and even stones and sticks and more unmentionable things, one of which struck Gavin full in the face as they fled the wrath of good and decent people. Inside the Conniewagon Contrition was driving, Lotta held the weeping Vangie, her own face streaming with tears as she tried to comfort the grieving woman.

Contrition set the horses into a gallop. A few milklings and older lads were still chasing after them. In the wagon behind them, Gavin wiped at his face, shaking with rage and disgust at this insult to his person.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish," Anton said. "We'll sleep hungry tonight, Dianna. And if word of this travels far, we might sleep hungry for more than one night!"

"No, we won't." Contrition's voice was grim. "I'll see to that. Poor Vangie! I'll bet she won't eat at all, no matter what I might scrounge up!"

"I've been afraid that this would happen even since Vangie joined the troupe," Anton said, mopping his forehead. "But Dolly would take her in, softhearted as she is, and the woman and the little boy with no place to turn. Not that I've been sorry. Evangeline has turned into an adequate actress, and what she lacks in professionalism she makes up for in beauty. But I'm afraid that this will ruin her. Her heart won't be in it, mourning for Jody as she'll be."

They didn't go hungry that night. They were fortunate to find an adequate campsite before darkness fell, and Contrition brought down half a dozen squirrels to make another hearty stew. She was getting mightily tired of squirrel stew herself, but at least Jody wouldn't be here to complain, and that would make it taste a deal better.

As Contrition had feared, Vangie wasn't able to choke down any supper.

"I failed him. He's my son, my little boy, and I failed him. He was never happy with me after I ran away from Dermont. He doesn't love me, he never loved me. I thought if I got him away from his father he'd change, but he didn't."

There wasn't anything anyone could say to comfort her about Jody's not loving her, because it was true. Blood will tell, and Jody's blood, unfortunately, seemed to be all on his father's side.

"At least you know that he's happy now," Contrition tried to tell Vangie. "That's something, anyway. You don't have to worry that he isn't being taken care of, or that he isn't happy."

"I know. I know he's better off, being the boy he is, but I still miss him! I should never have run away from Dermont. If I hadn't, I'd at least still have my son."

"And you'd have gone stark, raving mad, living with that man!" Contrition said, trying to keep the edge of impatience out of her voice. "To tell the truth, I thought it was pretty bad of you to go running away like you did, when I first found out about it. Taking Jody away from his father and all, it wasn't like he beat you or treated you like Amos Reeves treated my mother and me, working us half to death and abusing us. But now I can see that no woman could live with Mr. Dimwiddle and I don't blame you at all, you had to run away from him. Don't cry, Vangie. Who knows? Maybe Jody will change when he gets older; maybe he'll begin to miss you and talk your father into letting him see you."

"No, he won't. He thinks I'm a harlot, a prostitute! He'll always hate me!" Vangie said hopelessly. There was nothing any of them could do to lighten her mood. She hardly ate, she hardly slept, she was so distraught that all of their hearts ached for her. Even Gavin, who was usually so self-centered that he didn't care about anyone but himself, was sorry for her, offering her the choices parts of the

meals from his own portions and trying to persuade her to rehearse different parts with him, telling her that she did them better than any other actress he'd ever known instead of belittling her performance in order to build himself up; the way he usually did.

When they came to the next town where Elmer Tibbs had posted their banner, their attempted performance was a disaster. News travels fast, and although the innkeeper allowed them to play, the audience hissed at Vangie and several people made nasty, hurting remarks in loud voices.

"There she is, she's the one who left her husband and stole his son from him! Left him to become an actress, the wicked woman! Dragging a child into a wicked life!"

Somehow Vangie got through the performance. She was a professional, the play must go on. But her face was as white as paper before the play was over, and when she took her bow, someone in the audience threw a rotten egg at her, its stinking contents smearing her dress.

"For shame!" Contrition, outraged by this evidence of man's inhumanity to man, screamed at them. "Doesn't she have trouble enough, losing her little boy, without you treating her so shamefully? You don't know anything about it, you've judged her without knowing anything at all of the truth!"

Gavin dragged her off the stage, his hand over her mouth. "It's no use, Dianna. We'll have to get farther away from Cayuga Village before it stops."

They moved on the next day, not wanting to risk another performance here where the townspeople were so against them. They considered themselves lucky to get out of town without worse things happening to them.

In the next town, Evangeline refused to go on. "I'm ruining everything for you. They'll only hiss and boo the way they did the last time. Dianna knows all of Juliet's lines, she can go on for me."

"I won't be any good. I'm not nearly as good as you are!" Contrition protested.

"But nobody will hiss and boo at you or throw things at you! I'm going to have to quit the troupe; if I stay you'll never earn enough to keep from starving!"

"Vangie, I won't have you talking like that! Why, you're part of our family! this will blow over, wait and see. I won't hear of you leaving; we're going to stick together and ride it out, no matter how long it takes! I'll wager that even in the next town, nobody will know anything about this."

"I don't care. I just don't care any more! You'll be better off without me!"

"But what would you do? How would you live?" Lotta asked, her eyes filled with tears.

Evangeline's face was bitter. "That's fairly obvious, isn't it? They already call me a whore."

"You stop that this minute!" Contrition cried. This time she couldn't hold herself back; she put her hands on Evangeline's shoulders and shook the older woman until her teeth rattled and her hair came loose.

"If you don't stop talking like that, I'll do more than shake you! I'll hit you, I swear I will!" It didn't matter that Vangie had entertained a gentleman or two since Contrition had joined the troupe. She hadn't done it for the money or because she particularly liked doing it. She'd done it because she was lonesome, desperately lonesome after Jody had told her that he hated her, so she'd reached out for any comfort she could get, and Contrition knew for a fact that she hadn't done it but twice and then she'd been torn apart by her conscience.

Contrition wouldn't have done it and Lotta wouldn't have done it and Dolly wouldn't have done it, but they weren't Vangie. People were different and there were some who had to have love or they'd die.

Evangeline collapsed in tears, her shoulders shaking. "Go on for me tonight, Dianna," she begged. "Just for tonight. I'll try to pull myself together before our next stand."

"All right, but no more talking about leaving the troupe! You've got to promise!"

"I was no good, I was awful!" Contrition told Vangie after the performance. None of the rest of them contradicted her, although they all thought that Contrition's performance, while not as polished as Evangeline's, had been refreshing because she at least looked the

part. "You'll have to go on tomorrow night, at our next stand. I just don't have experience enough."

Evangeline went on, but Anton's prediction proved to be prophetic. Vangie's heart wasn't in it; her performance was flat and colorless. It was as if all meaning had gone out of her life and even her profession meant nothing to her any more. If it went on like this, things were going to get worse rather than better, on top of Evangeline's very real suffering.

Even Contrition's spirits were dampened. What could happen next? When you were far enough down, there wasn't supposed to be any place to go but up, but she had a sinking feeling that there was still more down to go, a feeling that she couldn't shake off.

But even her premonition didn't come close to hinting at what actually happened. It came right out of nowhere, and Port Byron was certainly just about as nowhere a place as there could be.

It had been so long since Contrition had run away from Amos Reeves that she didn't even think about him any more. There were a few faded and all but undecipherable notices for her apprehension on an inn hoarding here and there, but certainly nobody was looking for her after all this time. Even playing so close to Amos Reeves's farm didn't cause her the slightest twinge of apprehension. Amos never attended any form of amusement, and with her hair cropped short and wearing boy's clothing, there was almost no chance that anyone would recognize her.

There was no way she could know, no way anyone could have guessed, that Amos Reeves would be in Port Byron. Port Byron wasn't anything much at all, only some sheds and a house or two, and the canal where canalboats docked to take on or unload goods and what casual passengers there might be at so sparsely settled a spot. The Olympians only intended to stay one night, hoping that the banner Elmer Tibbs had posted at a crossroad would gather in enough paying customers to enable them to buy a few provisions to stay them until they went on to Auburn, where the pickings should be considerably better. It wasn't worth stopping at Port Byron at all, except that the horses needed a rest, and even payment-in-kind, in chickens or eggs or early vegetables, would be welcome.

It would be an open-air performance, if anybody showed up to

watch it. And afterwards, Contrition would set some rabbit snares and hope for the best. She was determined not to pilfer from farms any more, even taking so little from any one that the farmers would never miss it, because it upset Lotta so. And stealing was stealing, after all, even if you were hungry and had to steal in order to eat. Now that she'd been away from Amos Reeves long enough, and with good and kind people, most of her bitterness against the world was gone, and she no longer felt justified in doing whatever was necessary in order to survive. More of Lotta's preachings had got through to her than Lotta knew.

Amos Reeves, having come to Port Byron to pick up a plow he'd ordered, the old one having broken beyond mending when he'd started his early planting, narrowed his mean eyes when he saw the two Conniewagons pull into the sorry excuse for a town and stop under a stand of trees to make camp.

Actors, a troupe of actors! The very sight of them made the bile rise in his throat. No-goods, vagabonds, there ought to be a law against them, because as far as he could see they were good for nothing, they produced nothing, they took money out of honest men's pockets and gave nothing of value in return. He, for one, wouldn't be fool enough to part with a shilling to watch their gesturings and mouthing, and more fool any man who would!

Amos's temper, never even, hadn't been at its best since that bastard daughter of his had run off. Not about to pay out good money or food to replace her services by hiring somebody to do the work she'd done, he'd felt the burden of the extra work on his own shoulders, and as broad as they were, it had taken its toll on him. He wasn't a young man any more—he was near sixty—and Orville was getting too old to be the help he should. He'd have to let Orville go after harvest and hire somebody else next spring, and whoever he hired would want more than he'd paid Orville, which was virtually nothing.

Zeke was strong and willing enough, but he had to be watched because he was a natural, he forgot the simplest things. Only two nights ago, he'd forgotten to bring the cows in from pasture for milking until Amos had shouted at him and whacked his back with a hoe handle, and it hadn't done the cows any good for the milking to

be done so late, and Amos had gone into a range that had left him red of face and trembling, with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. And now, on top of all the other injustices directed at him, he had to pay out good money for a new plow. It was enough to make a man curse the world in general and everything that displeased him in particular.

There they were, actors, and worse, there were women, too. Women! Harlots, prostitutes, the scum of the earth! It wasn't decent. Look at that one with the mass of gold-colored hair; she looked as though she had a for-sale sign pinned to her bosom. And there was an older one who ought to be ashamed of herself, she looked almost decent, and another younger one, with brown hair, who might have walked down a street without anyone guessing that she was a fallen woman. Creatures sent by the devil to tempt decent men!

And there was a boy, a lad hardly more than a milking, and these wicked people had already corrupted him, a curly-headed lad bustling about. Something about the set of the lad's chin made Amos look more closely. Then his gorge rose in this throat and his head felt as though it were swelling up ready to burst. For a moment his eyes blurred and everything looked red, but when they cleared he saw that it was true, it was Contrition!

"You!" Amos bellowed, starting out at a dead run to confront her. "You, there! I've got you now!"

He thought he had her, but Contrition, after her first paralyzed shock at hearing that remembered and hated voice shouting at her, ducked and dodged and eluded his grasp. She took to her heels and ran as fast as she could, and that was fast enough, even without terror nipping at her heels. Something told her that if Amos got his hands on her, he might break every bone in her body, so great was his fury that she'd run away from him and managed to elude him for so long. She knew what his rages were like. He'd maim her before anyone could drag him off her.

Amos was after her, while the rest of the troupe milled around in pandemonium.

Contrition reached the canal bank just as the barge carrying Amos's plow pulled in to offload. She darted in front of the mules

that were towing it, while the bargemen shouted, "Fool boy! What'cha trying' to do, get yourself kilt?"

Don't look back, he might be gaining on you, Contrition told herself, spurting even faster as though her feet had wings. There wasn't any place to hide, he had her, oh, drat, drat, drat, she'd rather die right here than be dragged back to Amos's farm and have to be his slave again, suffering his abuse as well as being worked half to death until she was of age and could leave him legally. Of all the consarned, rotten luck, that Amos should be here in Port Byron! This time he'd make sure that she didn't get away from him again; he'd lock her in her room at night, or a shed, and he'd make sure that she'd never be able to lay her hands on his gun again, to help her get away.

Disregarding her own advice, because she had to know how much of a head start she had, she looked back over her shoulder. If she could outrun him and get to that field and across it and into that patch of woods over yonder, maybe she could still get away from him. She wouldn't be able to go back to the Olympians because Amos knew now that she was with them, but she could find some other way to earn her living if only she could get free!

There he was, a good distance back, jumping over the towline. Her heart leaped as his foot caught on the rope and he went sprawling on the towpath, and one of the mules, outraged as he scrambled up again and slammed his fist into its flank to get him out of the way, kicked at him. Its heels missed Amos's head by a fraction of an inch. Even more outraged, Amos balled up his fist and went to strike the mule again.

"Here now, who the devil do you think you are, abusing my horses?" The barge captain leaped to the canal bank and confronted Amos, his own fists raised in readiness to defend his mules. It was Contrition's chance to make time, to put more distance between Amos and herself, and she gathered herself to spring forward again, only the drama unfolding behind her froze her in her tracks.

Amos's rage broke all bounds at this further delay. He took a swipe at the canalman, the canalman ducked, and Amos lunged at him again. Amos's face turned brick red, his eyes bulged, the veins in his forehead stood out like cords, throbbing. And then Amos fell,

heavily, and only the skill of the hoggee and the quick action of the canaler prevented him from being trampled.

Disbelieving, Contrition saw the canaler bend over Amos and listen to his heart, trying to detect some sign that he was breathing.

"He's dead." The words were flat. "Dead as a doornail! Musta been a stroke."

Contrition tried to swallow through her constricted throat. Amos, dead? It couldn't be, it wasn't possible! But the other canalers had gathered around him now, and the Olympians en masse, even Evangeline, were there, and Jonathan Yeats bent over Amos and listened to his chest, and he confirmed what the captain had said.

This is it, Contrition thought. Amos is dead, and it's my fault, and they've got me. There wasn't any place to run. And a great, overpowering anger replaced her shock, as she thought how ridiculous it was for all her hopes for the future to come to an end on the canal bank in an unlikely place like Port Byron.

29

It had been a hard winter, but now that spring was here it should have been better. There wasn't much hauling to be done during the winter, and Sam Smith and his uncle Silas had had to tighten their belts until they'd rubbed against their backbones more than once before the roads started drying up and hauling could get underway again. Not that they'd actually starved; there'd always been some kind of food on the table, but a change from cornmeal mush and fatback would be nice.

Only instead of getting better, things got worse, because the worst possible thing that could happen, happened, Silas's off-ox sickened and died, and with only one ox, the amount of hauling Silas and

Sam could do was cut down considerably. It took a team to pull a heavy load in the heavy cart, especially over roads that were apt to be hock-deep in mud every time it rained.

"Uncle Silas, you ain't going to do it?" Sam asked, his winter-thinned face filled with apprehension. "You promised! When you found me and made me come back with you, you promised that you'd never do it again!"

Silas looked crestfallen, even ashamed. "I know I promised, Sammy. And I meant to keep my promise. But I didn't have any way of knowing that my ox was going to die, now did I? We got to git us another, there's no way we can git along with only one. If we don't have two, we won't earn enough over summer to tide us over next winter."

"I'd druther go hungry!" Sam said, his face pale so that even though his freckles had faded over winter, they still stood out. "I'd rather go powerful hungry than have you do it again!"

"It'll only be once or twice," Silas told his nephew. "It depends on how much I'll get. Mebby it'll only hev to be once. And you don't have to go with me. I can do it alone, even if havin' your help would make it easier."

"I ain't goin' to do it," Sam said. "I ain't never goin' to do it. You promised me that I wouldn't ever have to."

It was bad enough that he'd been snatched away from the Olympians and had to come back to his uncle. Not that he wasn't fond of Uncle Silas. Uncle Silas was good to him, after his fashion. He hadn't ever hit him, and he'd made Sam take the extra blanket all this past winter so he wouldn't sleep cold, and he'd made sure that Sam got his fair share of the food. He'd patched Sam's boots so's the snow wouldn't come through the soles. His uncle had promised his sister that he'd look after Sam, and he'd done it to the best of his ability. Family was family, and they were the only two left, and they had to stick together.

But even though his uncle had been good to him, Sam missed the Olympians like anything. He missed motherly Dolly and gruff but kind Anton and Sweet Lotta and Dianna. He missed Joyful till it hurt deep in his chest and stomach, nights, when he got to thinking about him. He and Uncle Silas couldn't afford to feed a dog, and Joyful

was a good dog, Joyful was his friend, he guessed there wasn't a better dog than Joyful in the whole world. He missed the horses and the Conniewagons; he missed watching the rehearsals and the plays and making himself useful at the campsites, earning his keep like a man by doing odd jobs and seeing that nobody bothered the wagons, he and Joyful wouldn't never let anybody come near the wagons. But most of all he missed the beautiful one, Miss Evangeline La Lune.

Miss Evangeline La Lune, Sam thought, was the most beautiful woman in the whole world. There couldn't ever be another lady as beautiful as Miss Evangeline La Lune was. Miss Evangeline La Lune was a goddess, come to earth so that mortals could worship her, and Sam was her chiefest worshipper. When he thought that he'd never see her again, he felt like crying or dying.

That Jody wasn't much. How a boy could have Miss Evangeline La Lune for a mother and not love her, even worship her, was more than Sam could fathom. But Jody didn't. He didn't even like his mother. He was mean to her, he was so mean to her that having seen Jody and how mean he was to Miss La Lune only once, Sam had still wanted to knock Jody's teeth out, only he couldn't because Jody was way younger and littler than he was. All the same, somebody'd made a big mistake somewhere, just about the biggest mistake that anybody could ever make. If Jody didn't love his mother, then Sam should have been her boy, because he did love her.

Now that it was well into spring, the Olympians would be on the road, bogieing around and seeing everything, the most desirable, the most wonderful life in the world. And he could have been a part of it, if only his uncle hadn't chanced to see him waiting for the inn to open so he could give Miss Dianna Laverne that message that Henry Davenport had charged him to give her. He'd broken his promise to Mr. Davenport and he felt bad about that, even if it hadn't been his fault. A promise was a promise and Sam liked Henry Davenport a lot. Doing heavy hauling behind a team of oxen wasn't anywhere near as satisfying as traveling with the Olympians would have been.

Only they didn't have a team of oxen now, they only had one ox, and unless they came by another, they wouldn't be doing much hauling, maybe not any at all. And his Uncle Silas was going to do it again to get the money to buy another ox. Sam couldn't see any other way they

could get another ox unless his uncle did it, but all the same, he wished he didn't have to. It was a fearsome thing, being a resurrectionist, and it was wrong, it was a sin. Besides, it was against the law.

"There ain't no use in putting it off," Silas said, his voice heavy. His voice had a right to sound heavy because what he had to do weighed heavily on him. "I'll do it the next burial. Don't look so down in the mouth, Sam. I ain't done it for a long time, not since you ran away from me last summer, so's nobody'll be expectin' anything like that to happen and there won't be no danger in it. I won't git caught if that's what's eating at you."

"It's eating at me, but I don't want you to do it at all." Sam pondered the alternatives, and then his face brightened. "I could git me a job on the canal," he said, his voice filled with a desperate hope. "I'm big enough and strong enough, I could git me a job as a hoggee."

"Might be you could, but it wouldn't help us none," Silas said. "You wouldn't git paid fer at least a month after you got you the job, and mebby not till the end of the season; some of them canalers don't pay till the season's over. And even iffen you were paid, you'd be a long ways away from here so's you couldn't hand your wages over to me, and even if you could, it wouldn't be anywhere near enough to buy another ox. I have to do it, so there's no use talkin' about it any more."

"I could git me a job swampin' out a saloon or shovelin' out the livery stable." Sam didn't want to give up. There had to be some other way, there just had to!

"You'd only get pennies for swampin' out saloons, and the liveryman don't need a boy, he's got two boys of his own. I don't want to hear any more about it. Hush up your mouth. After I git another ox, I won't never do it again, and that's a promise."

"You promised before."

"But we won't have the bad luck to have another ox go and die on us," Silas pointed out. "The other one is healthy, and I'll make sure to get me a good strong one with nothing wrong with it."

There was no more to be said. Silas had to do it. All that remained was to wait until there was a burying. Sam hoped that

nobody was sick and about to die, he hoped that there wouldn't be a funeral for months, or years, even if he and his uncle went hungry. Curled up in his narrow, hard bed at night, he lay awake worrying and fretting and wishing that things were different and that he was back with the Olympians where he could see Miss Evangeline La Lune every day and have Joyful to curl up with at night.

It didn't happen right away, but for all Sam's wishing, people do get sick and die. The waiting was long, considering that they needed another ox right away. And when it did happen, Silas was far from happy about it, because the deceased was a little girl, only six years old, Joan Darby, she was, from the brood of Darby children on Jake Darby's farm.

It was a terrible thing, the way it had happened, too, and that made it even worse. Little Joan Darby wasn't even sick. Her brother Michael was sick, he had a case of the chickenpox, but Joan wasn't sick. It was because Michael was sick that Lizzie Darby left the iron cauldron she was boiling-out clothes in unattended, out in the yard, to go and see what Michael was wanting when she heard him call out for her. Lizzie thought that Joan was down to the barn with her older brother Jim, who was keeping an eye on her, only Joan got away from him and ran and he went chasing after her, they made it into a game of tag, and Joan was looking over her shoulder to see if Jim was going to catch her when she stumbled and went head first into the cauldron.

Accidental deaths weren't all that uncommon, but in this case, with the child so young, the entire community grieved. Joan had been a pretty child, and it had taken her a long time to die, and friends and neighbors felt the shock and grief almost as much as her parents and her brothers and sisters.

But I didn't kill her, Silas told himself, struggling with his conscience. I didn't have nothing to do with her dying. And she's dead and nobody else is even sick and there ain't nothing can bring her back, and a body's a body even if it is just a child, and the doctor over to Monroe will pay me something for it. Not as much as he would for a grown man or woman, but something. Silas never delivered a body to Doctor Morton here in Utica; no doctor would risk using a local cadaver for his dissections, and besides, Doctor

Morton was an older man who already knew all he wanted to know about the innards of bodies. But Doctor Young over to Monroe was like his name, he was young, and he'd bought from Silas before because there was still a deal he needed to learn. Dissecting served a useful purpose; how else could a doctor learn without he had something to practice on?

All the same, it went against the grain. The human body was a sacred thing, even the derelicts and indigents that were generally all that were available. It was a pity that it had to be done so that doctors could learn more than they could get from books, but as long as they were going to do it, somebody was going to get the money for supplying the bodies, and as long as Silas was in such desperate need of money, it might as well be him.

Silas would have to work fast. It was fortunate that the weather wasn't too hot yet. Doctors like fresh cadavers, and besides, it wasn't pleasant delivering one that wasn't.

The entire town of Utica turned out for the funeral. Silas was there along with Sam. Sam, always tenderhearted, was all torn up about it. "It ain't right, it just ain't right!" Sam said. "She was only a little tyke, only old folks and sick folks should die."

"The ways of the Lord are mysterious; it isn't for us to understand," Silas told him, parroting the ministers who sermonized on such misfortunes. And he hoped that it was true; he hoped that the Lord had let little Joan Darby die so that Doctor Young would find out something that would save a couple of dozen other lives, because if that wasn't the way it was going to be, there wasn't any sense to it. He'd just tell himself that that was the way it was going to be; it would make it easier for him. Only it couldn't happen unless somebody delivered the body to Doctor Young.

Silas gave no indication of his purpose to Sam, who would certainly have gone into shock if he'd known that his uncle meant to resurrect little Joan. A grown man, an old man, maybe that wasn't so terrible bad, but not a little girl! If the off ox hadn't had to be replaced as fast as Silas could replace it, he wouldn't have done it, even hoping as he did that it was all for a purpose.

Silas waited until Sam was sleeping soundly before he crept out of the house near midnight. Sam had had nightmares about Joannie

falling into the cauldron earlier in the evening, and that had held Silas up. Folks went to bed early and every hour counted; it was a long way to Monroe. At least he could be double sure that no one would be up and about and discover him at his task.

As hardened to this sort of work as he was, Silas's stomach was queasy as he opened the new grave and uncovered the small coffin. At least it wasn't very heavy. The lid came off with a minimum of effort. Lifting the light body, as light as feathers in its white shroud, he laid it on the blanket he'd placed beside the grave and made short work of covering the grave again, leaving it looking as nearly undisturbed as he could even, to replacing the flowers in the exact places the mourners had placed them. That was the most important part of this business and one that mustn't be scimped.

It was a pity that ox was so slow. Even traveling all night, with his heart in his throat every foot of the way, praying that he wouldn't meet another traveler on the road, it would be all too many hours before he reached his destination. He'd have to leave the cart hidden when he got to Monroe and carry his pitiful burden through back ways to the doctor's house; he couldn't risk having the cart seen there. And he'd have to scout around before he started back, hoping to find something to haul, to explain his trip. He could say that he'd just been out looking for hauling to do, but it would be more foolproof if he actually had a load.

Sick at heart, Silas kept the ox moving. He moved his lips silently, begging the Lord to understand and forgive him, reminding Him that this would be the last time, and that he wouldn't be doing it now unless it was absolutely necessary in order for him to take care of young Sam. The short hairs at the back of his neck stood up and he strained his ears for any sound of pursuit or any indication that another traveler was on the road this late at night, or rather, this early in the morning. He'd greased the wagon wheels so that they didn't creak. If he was to be caught, it wouldn't because he hadn't been careful.

The ox kept up its steady, plodding pace. Silas hoped that Sam wouldn't wake up and find him gone before morning. He could explain to Sam that he'd gone out looking for work, if Sam didn't wake up before daylight, but if the boy woke up when it was still

dark, he'd know what Silas had done, and Silas had a feeling that if Sam found out that he'd resurrected little Joan, things would never be the same between them.

There was one good thing. It hadn't rained during the last few days so there was no danger of the cart bogging down. But then Silas's luck ran out. Toward dawn, when he was still three miles from his destination, the sky clouded over and rain came down in bucketsful. It was a cloudburst, so heavy that it obscured Silas's vision. Silas had seen a lot of rainfalls in his life, but he'd seldom seen one this heavy.

He took a deep breath, hardly daring to hope, when the rain ended as abruptly as it had started. The road wasn't too bad yet, it had only lasted a few minutes. Straining his eyes, he saw what he took to be a sizable puddle up ahead. Just to be on the safe side, he climbed down and rolled up his pants legs and took off his shoes and waded through it. It wasn't all that deep, and there was still a good solid bottom under it. He could chance it. With no load, the cart shouldn't get stuck.

Replacing his shoes, Silas climbed back into the cart. The ox moved ahead. The cart entered the puddle. There wasn't any way in the world that Silas could have known that off to the edge of the puddle, where he hadn't waded through, it was much deeper, a hole eroded out from previous rains, that no one had filled in yet, and that at the edge of this deep hole there was a rock lying there like a trap to catch a sinner.

The cart lurched. There was an ominous cracking sound. The cart settled over the broken wheel.

And now another sound reached Silas's ears, even more ominous. Another wagon was on the road, approaching him from the direction of Monroe.

Silas was caught. There wasn't any way in the world that whoever was driving the other wagon wouldn't stop to see if he could help. And the first light of dawn was streaking the sky, and the other wagon was close enough so that if Silas were to lift his small cargo and try to make a run for it, he'd be seen. He could already make out that there were two men in the wagon, not just one.

Silas panicked. Filled with despair, his despair inundating him

like a flood, he plunged out of the wagon and off the road and made for the woods in the distance, across open fields with demons at his heels, hurling himself headlong into a patch of brush. Raising himself just far enough to see over it, he thought that the men in the other wagon hadn't seen him, they were pointing at the wagon, not in the direction he'd run.

He took the opportunity to streak for the trees when the other wagon stopped beside his broken one and the men climbed out and examined it. By the time one of the men had unwrapped the blanket from around the burden it concealed, he had reached the relative shelter of the copse. He didn't stop there, but went on running.

He wouldn't be able to go back to Utica, not ever. His cart and ox would be recognized. His only hope was to keep on going until he reached some place where he had never been seen, and change his name, and become one of the itinerant wanderers looking for work up and down the land. He'd never see Sam again. God grant that Sam would be all right, that he'd manage to survive.

Sam had woken up at daybreak, the habit of a hard-working lifetime when the daylight hours meant money, providing there was work to be done in them, to find his uncle gone and the ox and the cart gone as well.

Not being a dimwitted boy, Sam had a very good idea, a sickening, despairing idea, of where his uncle had gone, and why. If he'd gone on any legitimate business, he would have wakened Sam and taken him with him. Therefore, the business he'd gone on wasn't legitimate, and there was only one piece of illegitimate business Silas could be on, seeing that little Joan Darby's funeral had been yesterday.

There was only some stale cornbread in the house. It had been more than a week since Sam had had any milk to drink. He chewed on a piece of the cornbread, but it was so dry that it was hard to get it down, even if he was hungry enough to eat his own shoes. The water in the water bucket was stale but he drank some of it anyway.

'He ain't doin' what I'm thinkin' he's doing', Sam told himself. He wouldn't do that, not a little girl. To keep his mind off what he was afraid his uncle was doing, he went outside and began to pull up the weeds that had sprung up after the last rain, yanking them out by

the roots where they had established themselves in the tiny patch of yard. He threw most of them in a pile but he kept the young dandelions separate; they could be boiled up and eaten, in case Uncle Silas didn't come home soon with something more palatable to put on the table and a good reason for having left without Sam that morning, not the reason Sam was afraid he had left for. Dandelion greens without any fatback or ham, something to give them flavor, weren't much of anything to look forward to eating, but when the cupboard's empty you take what you can scrounge up and don't complain about it.

Pulling the weeds didn't take long and he wouldn't cook the dandelion greens for a spell yet, in case his uncle did come home. He put the greens in the house and then he went out and walked the streets to make the time pass more quickly. He passed the mercantile shop and the blacksmith's and the livery stable and the drygoods shop and the seed and feed store and two saloons, and when he'd traversed from one end of Utica to the other, he turned around and went back.

A few people spoke to him. "Morning, Sam." But none of them said what he hoped they'd say, that they'd given Silas a hauling job or that they'd seen him leave on a hauling job. That was a crazy notion anyway. If his uncle had had a hauling job, he would have roused him to tell him he was going and ask him if he wanted to go along. Sam liked going along; it was something to do. Uncle Silas liked his company on long, lonely stretches of road, and besides, it was teaching Sam a trade.

The sun was high in the sky now, it was past noon, although it seemed as though it should already be getting on toward dark. Sam had never known that just waiting could take so long or be such hard work.

He went back home. He finished the last of the stale cornbread, washing it down with water. Then he worried that he shouldn't have eaten it all. What if Uncle Silas came back, with no money from a hauling job, and there was nothing to eat in the house, and he was hungry?

It seemed a pity to waste wood building up a fire in the rusty old stove just to boil up a mess of dandelion greens but they'd be

something to eat even if they weren't filling. There was nothing about dandelion greens to fill up the hollow places in a hungry man's stomach. But they'd be ready, just in case they were needed.

When the greens had cooked to a limp, soggy mess, Sam took them off the stove. It must be going on for two o'clock in the afternoon now. He went outside and squinted up at the sun. He was right; it was just about two in the afternoon.

It wouldn't hurt to walk over and ask Mr. Morris at the livery stable if there was any work he could do, even an hour's work. Or Mr. Green at the mercantile store or Mr. Zito at the tavern. They'd say no, but he couldn't be absolutely sure unless he asked, and it wouldn't hurt to have people know that he was looking for work, just in case some work turned up and they might remember that he was available.

Nobody needed any sweeping out or water carrying or errands run, even for the pay of only a bite to eat. If Uncle Silas didn't get back tonight, Sam would have to eat the cold dandelion greens or else go to bed hungry. He suspected that he'd go to bed hungry, even if he ate them.

Of course his uncle was going to come back. He'd come back with money from his hauling job and they'd have a real supper, even meat. But if it was a long hauling job, his uncle might not get back tonight. It wasn't anything to worry about; it wouldn't kill him to go to bed a little hungry. He wouldn't have to worry that his uncle had gone out to do that other thing because if his uncle had gone out to do that other thing, he would have been back long before now.

Standing outside the mercantile store, wondering whether or not to go home and wait for his uncle or try to find an hour's work someplace else, Sam saw a wagon, driven at an unseemly fast pace, come down the main street and pull up in front of the building where the town constable administered law and order. There were two men in the wagon, and one of them, the younger one, jumped down and was shouting something about who was in charge of the law here.

"We found us a body, it's a little girl!" the young man shouted. "And the wagon we found her in was bogged down in a mudhole, with a broken wheel and only one ox, and we was told it belongs to a man named Smith, a hauler who lives here in Utica."

A crowd gathered in a matter of seconds. Mr. Green ran out of his establishment and looked under the burlap sacks that were in the back of the wagon with a blanket over them. His face turned the color of his name and he choked, "It's her, it's little Joan Darby!"

"Silas Smith!" The name went from mouth to mouth. Sam's stomach contracted and he wished he was dead.

"There's his boy, there's Sam!" Mr. Zito grasped Sam by his skinny shoulders and shook him. "What do you know about this? Speak up! Silas resurrected her, didn't he? He resurrected her and you know about it, you're his boy!"

"I don't know nothing!" Sam blurted out, his face stark white.

"Where is he? Where could he go, where would he head for?"

"I don't know! I never seen him this morning!" Sam wriggled. "Let me loose! I ain't done nothing!"

Mr. Zito let him loose so abruptly that Sam all but fell, but he recovered himself with the agility of his youth and he was away and running. Only there wasn't any place to run. They all knew where he lived, and if he went home, they'd come after him. He darted around a corner, out of sight of the crowd but not out of earshot of their angry, shouting voices.

"We'll hang him! We'll find him, and we'll hang him! Somebody git old Josh Channing's dogs, we'll track him down if it takes till doomsday, and we'll take a rope with us to save us the bother of hauling him back! The nearest tree'll do!"

"His house! Burn his house!" another shout went up. "Burn it to the ground, burn the resurrectionist out!"

Sam ran again. The crowd was a mob now, a mob out of control. He didn't want to look back but he couldn't help it. The hastily lighted torches caught the weathered boards and they went up like tinder. In minutes the place that had been his home was engulfed in flames, its roof caving in with a shower of sparks that rose up into the sky along with the black smoke that seemed a foreboding of doomsday.

He had to get away. They might remember him again, and now that their fury was at fever pitch, egged on by the burning of Silas Smith's house, they might decide to hang him as a sort of appetizer until they could get their hand on his uncle for their main course.

There wasn't anything he could do for his Uncle Silas. If they caught him, they'd hang him, with or without a trial and conviction. Sam was alone. He didn't have anybody but himself.

He struck out at a fast trot, his stomach hollow, and incongruously, he thought of the dandelion greens. They'd been cooked twice, now. Not that it mattered. He couldn't have eaten them no matter how hungry he was. They'd been for Uncle Silas and now Uncle Silas would never get to eat them either.

His heart felt like a lump of lead in his chest as he trotted. He'd never known how lonesome it was to be alone. It was worse than when he'd run away, before Henry Davenport had found him, because he'd known he could go back to his uncle if he wanted. Now he didn't have anybody at all.

Contrition was driving the lead wagon while Joyful ranged along beside it, dashing off to the side of the road every once in a while to sniff for animal scent or anything else exciting. Running alongside the Conniewagons was one of the most joyful aspects of Joyful's life. Anton, driving the prop wagon, was trailing behind. They'd got a good start this morning, and they should be at their destination, Clinton, in plenty of time to see if Elmer Tibbs had managed to find a place to post their banner and to find a good campsite before time to put on their offering. Their last stand had been fairly profitable; they'd played two nights, and with the unquenchable optimism of the traveling thespian, they hoped that it would be even more profitable in Clinton.

Contrition's mind was full of the recent events in her life, events so unforeseen and astonishing that she still had trouble believing them.

There'd been an investigation of sorts into Amos's death, but it hadn't amounted to anything. The entire crew of the canal boat had been witnesses that Contrition hadn't been anywhere near him when he'd died, that she hadn't done anything, that Amos had started chasing after her for no reason at all that they could see. Likely he'd mistaken the lad for some other boy.

The Olympians hadn't played in Port Byron that night. They'd pulled out and put as much distance between themselves and Port

Byron as they could before dark. There was no use in taking chances, hanging around there were it had happened, in case somebody got to wondering.

She was free. She'd never again, as long as she lived, have to worry that Amos would find her and drag her back to his farm. She could go anywhere she wanted to go, do anything she wanted to do, without fear. It was a wonderful feeling. It was just about the best feeling she'd ever had. If it hadn't been for Evangeline, she would have been the happiest girl in the world.

The entire troupe still worried and fretted about Vangie. Evangeline was still so heartbroken over losing Jody that she seemed to be in a daze most of the time, not caring about anything at all. Her performances were lackluster, her eyes were pools of misery, she didn't sleep well, she'd lost so much weight that her clothes hung on her, and Lotta was kept busy taking them in, and Contrition and Dolly were kept busy concocting treats to try to tempt her appetite.

Contrition hoped that Jody would make Dermont P. Dimwiddle as miserable as he had made his mother. Not that there was much chance of that. Jody and Dermont P. Dimwiddle were two peas in a pod.

At the side of the road, Joyful gave a frantic yelp and veered off into some brush at the side of the ditch. His yipping and yapping intensified, more frantic than ever. Contrition hauled up and climbed down off the wagon while Lotta poked her head out saying, "Do make him be quiet, Dianna! Vangie just dozed off and goodness knows she needs some sleep!"

"Joyful, what in tunket ails you?" Contrition demanded, reaching for a stick in case it was a snake that had the dog so excited. If it was a harmless gartersnake, she'd leave it be, but rattlesnakes weren't unknown and she didn't want Joyful bitten. "What have you got in there, anyway? No rabbit's worth all this to-do!"

She approached the clump of brush cautiously, not wanting to take any chances. And there was Sam, their Sam, Sam Smith, sitting up and rubbing sleep out of his eyes. Sam, so skinny that his bones seemed about to come right through his skin, half-starved for sure, or more nearly three-quarters starved. Sam with fright on his face

until he recognized her, Sam wrapping his arms around the ecstatic Joyful and hugging him so tight that Joyful yelped in joyful protest while he all but licked every inch of skin off Sam's face.

"It's Sam!" Contrition cried. "It's Sam Smith!"

They came piling down out of the Conniewagons, all of them. "Sam! What are you doing here, where did you come from?"

"I'm runnin'." Sam said. He gulped a deep breath and his face, pinched and white with fatigue and hunger, was tragic. "I had to run. My uncle, he resurrected a girl, and he got caught cartin' her to a doctor to sell, and he had to run, and I won't never see him again. They burned down our house. I won't never see my uncle no more. He weren't much, but he was all I had. I don't have nobody now."

Dolly, with an exclamation of horrified shock, opened her arms to gather Sam to her bosom, but another pair of arms pushed her aside. Evangeline, her face crumpling, took Sam into her arms and held him close.

"Yes, you do," Vangie said. "You've got me."

The woman and the boy, both bereft, clung to each other as though they would never let go for as long as they lived.

30

HENRY and Leon had been on the road for a week, searching in every town and hamlet and crossroads for the Olympians' banner. It was late afternoon when they pulled into Senaca Falls and spotted the banner at last, posted outside an inn.

They were all in the common room, refreshing themselves against playing that evening. Lotta saw Henry first, as he loomed up in the doorway, and she screamed and came near to fainting. Then Dolly

was hugging him, kissing him, babbling over him, while all of the others gathered around, the men slapping his back and pumping his hand until he thought that his arm would drop off his shoulder, Lotta and Dolly and Vangie barraging him with questions, too fast for him to even attempt to answer.

"Yes, I'm back. Yes, I'm all right. Yes, all my troubles have been resolved. I'll tell you all about it later. Where's Contrition?"

"Dianna? She's at the campsite, over on the far side of town. She'll be here later, after she's made sure the horses are rubbed down and fed. You know how she is, she won't trust anyone else. She sent Sam in to have some supper here at the inn; he'll go back and watch out for things after he's eaten."

Henry noticed Sam for the first time. The lad had jumped up from the table where a laden plate had just been placed in front of him. He rumpled Sam's hair. "It's good to see you, Sam. Go ahead and finish your supper, we'll have time to talk later."

He turned back to Dolly. "I don't see Justin. Is he at the campsite with Contrition?"

"My goodness, no! What would he be doing there? He's in Albany, or on that farm the Odets own outside of Albany, with his wife, where else would he be?"

Henry's heart jumped so hard that it made him jump. If Justin was at Maple Lane with *his wife*, and Contrition was here, then Contrition hadn't married Justin! He wouldn't have to kill Leon after all.

"There, you see? You've been tearing yourself apart over nothing!" Leon said. "And I'm thirsty and hungry. We'll all have the best the inn has to offer, and it's on me, in celebration of finally getting to meet all of you!"

Henry hadn't asked his irresponsible, rascallion cousin to come with him on this search. Leon had simply elected to come and Henry hadn't been able to prevent him. Leon, Henry reflected darkly, was still the bane of his existence, even if he had made short work of clearing up the mess in New York City once they'd set foot in this country again.

It was no fault of Leon's, Henry thought sourly, that they had ever got back to America! Leon had liked the French Riviera and the society of the French Riviera far too much to be in any hurry to

leave it, even after Henry's broken leg had healed and his pneumonia-racked body had recuperated. Even after weeks of hovering between life and death after Leon had taken him, unconscious, off the fishing boat in which they had made their escape from Italy and the family Mazzini, and turned the Riviera upside-down obtaining the best of care for him, not leaving his side until he was out of danger. It still followed that after Henry was out of danger, Leon had been convinced that the only place for him to regain his health was in that warm, balmy paradise, however long it took.

It didn't make any difference that Leon had been right. Leon had enjoyed staying on, and on, and on! That was the unforgivable part, how much Leon had enjoyed it, not caring a whit that Henry had been almost out of his mind with wanting to get back.

Their lodgings had been luxurious, to say the least. Leon, being Leon, had immediately discovered friends who were wintering in southern France, English friends who had their own villa and who had immediately insisted that Leon and his cousin be their guests for as long as necessary. In a spacious, airy bedroom, its windows open to the balmy air that was redolent with the scent of the flowers in the garden just outside, Henry had lain in a huge, soft bed, surrounded by every imaginable comfort, attended by a physician twice every day and by servants alert to his every movement or even a blink of his eye. And Leon, once Henry had been out of danger, had resumed his reprehensible womanizing.

Leon had had five, count them, five different affairs during their stay, each young lady more beautiful and more charming than the last. Leon had wined and dined and danced and refreshed himself in the silky waters of the Mediterranean Sea and lolled in the sun on the silver beaches, always with a beautiful and charming young lady at his side.

There had been English Penelope, fair of hair and blue of eye. There had been German Griselda, fairer of hair and bluer of eye. Gabby, as French as her name, had been as slender and graceful as a birch tree, her hair auburn, her eyes violet, her mouth like a crushed strawberry. Lisette had a wealth of dark hair and hazel eyes and an accent so delightful that Leon had all but committed himself, only his sense of self-preservation sending him on to the fifth, and for the

life of him Henry couldn't remember her name, but she had been a Swiss, fresh-cheeked and brown-haired and brown-eyed, with a dimple that was devastating.

The only thing that had finally enabled Henry to get Leon packed and moving was that the competition between the five young ladies finally got out of hand, and with their friends and families taking sides, the balmy temperatures suddenly seemed too warm, and even Leon could see that it was time for him to take to his heels. That, and the fact that if he didn't agree that it was time to get home to America, Henry had solemnly promised that he would strangle him. Or worse, write to the Mazzinis and apprise them of Leon's whereabouts. Leon hadn't believed a word of it, but Henry's face had been so grim that he couldn't be absolutely sure.

There had been, mercifully, only two brief affairs aboard the ship that had brought them at last to New York City, where Leon had plunged into the matter of the murder with an expertise that had left Henry furious that his cousin was able to do, seemingly without effort, all that he himself had been unable to do.

The stableboy who had been witness that both Leon and Henry had spent the night in the stable, with Henry unconscious, during the time when Miss Flora Baldwin had been assisted from this earth, was located with no trouble at all, Leon remembering with perfect clarity both his name and the location of the livery stable. Leon could attest that Henry's cane had been nowhere about Henry's person or his vicinity when he had found Henry unconscious and Miss Flora Baldwin gone.

Leon, free to wander around the city, was able to search out the haunts of the late, unfortunate Miss Baldwin and by devious means, many of them involving money, obtain the names of Miss Baldwin's gentlemen friends. By adroit questioning, he had narrowed the field to one, a jealous gentleman of violent temper, who had desired that his part-time mistress become his full-time mistress with such vehemence that Miss Baldwin had told him that she would no longer be his mistress at all. Being a gentleman of means and respectable repute in his own segment of society, the gentleman had not come under suspicion, especially as the police already had a prime suspect and saw no need to look for any other.

It was nothing that Henry couldn't have done for himself, Henry thought sourly, if he'd been free to pursue the investigation without the danger of being laid by the heels. And if he had possessed a naturally devious mind such as Leon possessed. And a head that remained as clear as Leon's, no matter how much alcohol had been consumed.

Now that it was over, now that the endless nightmare had ended, Henry would have liked nothing better than to never have to see Leon again. But here Leon was, all fired up about this new adventure of tracking down an elusive little actress and learning first hand about the life of traveling thespians, which was a good deal more amusing than returning to the bosom of his family and being expected to employ himself in some sort of useful work.

It wasn't that Henry wasn't grateful to Leon, who had saved his life twice, once in Italy and again here in America. It wasn't that Henry wasn't fond of his cousin, because it was impossible not to be fond of the rascalion. It was just that Henry had a sinking feeling that if Leon were with him, he might find himself up to his neck in another peck of trouble.

Lotta's eyes were glued, mesmerized, to Leon's face. Lotta appeared to be stunned as well as tongue-tied at the sight of this fabulous gentleman from another world, a real gentleman, the handsomest gentleman she had ever seen. And in his turn, Leon's eyes could not tear themselves from Lotta's face, as he was struck by her pure, innocent beauty, by her goodness, by her gentleness, by everything he had never looked for in a young lady except the surface beauty. If this had been the young lady Henry was so determined to win, then Leon wouldn't have blamed him a bit. Seeing that Lotta wasn't the young lady, Leon thought that his cousin must be rowing with one oar out of the water.

Anton broke the spell. Food and drink, the best the innkeeper had to offer, as the guest of this young Corinthian who for some unknown reason was traveling with their Henry. "Host, what do you have to offer?"

"Roast beef, ham, capon, cheese, any potable you care to mention . . ." the host started to list the available fare.

Leon waved his hand. "We'll have them all," he said. He moved

to stand beside Lotta. "As my cousin is so regrettably remiss in his social duties, I will have to introduce myself. Leon Murdoch, at your service."

"I'm Carlotta Flechette." Lotta managed to get her name past her lips, feeling that she was on the verge of swooning. "And this is Miss Evangeline La Lune, and Mrs. Dolly Burnside, and Mr. Anton Burnside, and Mr. Jonathan Yeats, and Mr. Gavin Hurley."

"I'll take our horse and buggy to the livery stable and walk on out to the campsite," Henry said. Leon didn't hear him and Henry didn't care. All Henry cared about was that Contrition wasn't married to Justin, she wasn't married to anybody, and that she was here in Utica, and that a few minutes' brisk walk would take him to her.

His long strides made short work of the distance between the inn and the campsite. What would he say to Contrition when he saw her? It didn't matter. It would all fall into place when he got there. His heart beating like a kettledrum, he spotted the Conniewagons and lengthened his stride.

A fury came hurtling at him out of nowhere, a fury with huge teeth and terrifying growls and snarls, and Henry stopped in his tracks, backing up. What the devil!

"Joyful, what is it?"

She was here, coming toward him, her voice controlling the brute of a dog that was showing every intention of tearing him limb from limb. The dog subsided, but it still kept a watchful eye on him, ready to spring at any suspect movement.

"Damnit, Contrition, call off your dog! I've been searching for you for over a week and this is the welcome I get?"

"Well, you've found me."

"Aren't you even glad to see me?"

"Why should I be? You didn't even bother to say goodbye and tell me you were going, wherever it was you went."

"I went to Italy. And I left you a message."

"I didn't get any message. Did you have a good time in Italy? Jonathan tells me it's warm there even in the winter."

"It was freezing and I had a lousy time. Contrition, will you marry me?"

"No, I will not!" If Joyful had been the very incarnation of fury when Henry had walked into the campsite unannounced, now Contrition's fury made Joyful's seem like an ecstatic welcome by comparison. Contrition faced him, her arms akimbo, her eyes flashing fire that threatened to burn him to a cinder where he stood.

"You have your nerve! You treat me like dirt, you ignore me, you go away without a word, and now you come back and ask me to marry you! What's the matter, did your conscience start bothering you? Did you have the idea that I'm a poor little waif who can't take care of herself, that because you found me, now you're stuck with me? I don't need you, drat you, I can take care of myself! I don't want your blasted pity and I don't want your blasted charity and I don't want you!"

All of Contrition's pent up agony and fury of the past months came pouring forth. The scoundrel, the snake, the skunk! To think he'd go away without even a word and come back without even a warning and have the unmitigated gall to ask her to marry him!

"Contrition, won't you let me get a word in edgeways? How can I explain if you go on ranting at me like a fishwife?" Henry took a step toward her, but only one, because Joyful's hackles rose and his teeth seemed to grow even as Henry looked at them.

"I don't want your dratted explanations! I didn't ask you to come back, so you can dratted well take yourself away again!"

Henry risked another step and his pant leg was in shreds. In another second, he was up in a tree, with Joyful leaping at him in a futile effort to add his leg to the trophy of torn pant leg.

"Damnit, Contrition, tell that brute to let me down!"

"Keep him there, Joyful!" Contrition turned her back and started walking, her shoulders straight, her head high. "It's nothing to me if you have to stay there all night!" While Henry watched, incredulous, she quit the campsite, and one tentative inching down a fraction convinced him that he might very well have to stay there all right.

Actually, it was less than an hour. That dog was the most exasperating creature Henry had ever come into contact with, barring Contrition herself. When he talked to it, it wagged its tail, giving every evidence that it would like nothing better than to be

friends. But when he thought he had it convinced, and eased down an inch, it bared its teeth again and kept him where he was. Maybe it wouldn't tear him limb from limb if he risked climbing down, its wagging tail seemed so friendly, but Henry wasn't sure which end of it he could trust.

That was how Sam found them when he returned to the campsite with his stomach purring with contentment but his head awhirl because Miss Dianna had stormed into the inn and gone directly to the room the three actresses shared and came down again with her few possessions wrapped in a shawl and announced that she was leaving and that they could tell that no-good skunk that he needn't bother trying to follow her.

"Dianna, where are you going?" Lotta had wailed, her face white.

"Away," Contrition had said. "Don't worry about me, Lotta. I'll be all right. I'll let you know where I am, some time, after I'm sure that that skunk isn't hanging around any longer." And she had gone, with the troupe looking after her helplessly, knowing perfectly well that if she'd made up her mind to go, there was no stopping her, and Leon looking after her with his face filled with astonishment and a sudden, complete understanding of why Henry had been in such a tearing hurry to find this girl again.

Lotta had never had a testimonial before. She was overwhelmed. She was very nearly in tears. She didn't deserve a testimonial, she wasn't even the leading lady, she was only a supporting actress. Evangeline should have had the testimonial.

As was the custom, the next morning Lotta returned the silver cup to the whitesmith, so that she could turn over what she got for it to the common fund. Leon immediately rebought it and presented it to her again.

"You can't return it this time," Leon told her. "See, I've had it engraved, to C, from her ardent admirer, L."

"Mr. Murdoch, you shouldn't have! I can't accept it, it's far too expensive, all that engraving!"

Lotta had no idea how far too expensive the cup was, because Leon had bought a solid silver one as a replacement. It was Evangeline who detected the difference, gasping with astonishment

that wasn't in the least laced with envy. Evangeline didn't need testimonials and silver cups any more; she had Sam. It was riches beyond compare to have somebody to love who loved you back, it meant more than all the admiration and adulation in the world, it filled her heart and made her content, her life complete.

When the troupe moved on, Leon was always one step ahead of it. He didn't know where Henry had gone any more than he knew where Contrition had gone, but he knew where he was, in hot pursuit of the only woman in the world he could ever love. There had been three testimonials in a row now, and Lotta was near to hysteria.

"You must stop this! People will think that I'm your bona-roba!"

"They won't think any such thing. They'll think that you're the girl I'm going to marry."

"You can't marry me! I'm an actress!"

"You're an angel. And if it worries you about being an actress, I'll set you up in a dressmaking establishment until the curse has worn off and you can marry me in good conscience."

"A kept woman! That's the same as being a...a..." Lotta couldn't force the word from her lips.

Wherever Contrition was, she wasn't giving Henry any more trouble than Lotta was giving Leon. Leon tried once again to explain.

"I love you. I want to marry you. I don't care if you're an actress. And when you're my wife, you won't be an actress any more, so what's the difference?"

Lotta was frantic. She dissolved into tears at the drop of a pin. "Of course I love him, how could I help loving him? I fell in love with him the first time I laid eyes on him!" she confessed to Evangeline and Dolly. "But I'm a lost soul because I'm an actress, his family and friends would never accept me, he'd be ruined, and I can't do that to him, no matter how much I love him."

"If anybody thinks you're a lost soul, I'll have a few words to say to them!" Dolly bristled, her face red with indignation. "I'll give them to know that you're as good and pure and innocent as you were the day you were born, and I'd just like to see anybody deny it!" Confronted with a slur on her Lotta's character, Dolly was a dragon.

Queen Victoria herself would accept Lotta after Dolly got through with her. "The question is whether or not Mr. Leon Murdoch is good enough for you, for all that he's Henry's cousin!"

Leon himself had grave doubts about that. It would take him a lifetime to prove that he was good enough for Lotta. He regretted every affair he'd ever had. He wished that he were an upstanding young man of impeccable moral principles like Henry was. He would atone for his past sins in any way he knew how, if only he could have Lotta. But for the first time in his life, Leon had come up against a stalemate. Lotta wouldn't have him, and all of Dolly's and Evangeline's persuasions, added to his, wouldn't budge her. Lotta was an actress; she was beyond the pale. Damn Henry! Why didn't that cousin of his come back and help him when he needed him more than he ever had in his life?

Henry wasn't in the best of tempers when he pulled his horse and buggy to a stop after spotting a figure that was all too familiar to him on the towpath that ran alongside the road. He had returned from his self-imposed errand several days after Sam had persuaded Joyful to let him down out of the tree, only to find that Contrition hadn't returned to the troupe and none of them had any idea where she was.

New York, Henry thought. She's gone to New York to find Mr. Tyrone Power and become a famous actress. But Mr. Tyrone Power hadn't seen her when Henry arrived to retrieve Contrition.

The canal, then. It was the only lead Henry had, Contrition's love for the canal. So he'd gone searching along its length, and here she was at last, a hoggee!

Contrition started, nearly jumping out of her skin, when Henry's hand descended on her shoulder. "Just what the devil do you think you're doing?" Henry shouted at her. "A hoggee! You can't be a hoggee, you're a girl!"

"I'm not a hoggee, you dratted idjut! I'm only spelling the regular boy because I wanted to get the feel of it. I made the whole trip, both ways, because it was something I had to do, to see it all, before I go on to New York and find Mr. Tyrone Power! And what the devil do you think you're doing?, creeping up on me like this!"

"I came to tell you that you're an heiress. Everything Amos

Reeves had belongs to you. He never made a will cutting you off. So you aren't a poor little penniless waif, and you can't think that I'm marrying you because I'm sorry for you and I think I have to take care of you, because now you're a young woman of means!"

"I wouldn't touch a cent of Amos Reeves's money!"

"It's yours whether you touch a cent of it or not. You can at least use part of it to help out the troupe. The props are in pitiful condition, and if Dolly and Evangeline ever persuade Lotta to marry Leon, they'll need to replace her, and you can pay the fee for some young actress who can't afford to pay it for herself. And they need at least two more men now that I'm not with them any more and Justin isn't with them, and their cast is so depleted that they can hardly put on a play!"

Contrition's ears pricked up. It would be nice to help the Olympians, there was nothing she would like better. They'd been good to her, they were her family, she'd intended helping them once she became a famous actress in New York City, but that would take time and now she could do it now. And come to think of it, it would serve Amos Reeves right to have his money spent on a troupe of thespians; he'd be whirling in his grave.

And what was that about Lotta? Leon Murdoch, that beautiful young man Dolly had introduced her to, Henry's cousin, wanted to marry her, and she wouldn't? Contrition would just see about that! Lotta was a goose! Here she had a chance to be a respectable married woman and get herself saved and have about the handsomest man in the world for her husband, and she didn't have sense enough to take it! If Lotta loved Leon Murdoch, Contrition would see that she married him, and Lotta would but her no buts!

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

"You'll marry me?"

"I didn't say that! I said I'd take Amos Reeves's money and help the Olympians, and I'll see to it that Lotta marries Mr. Murdoch, if she loves him and wants to marry him. I didn't say anything about marrying you."

"But you're going to."

"Give me one good reason!" Contrition would rather have died than let Henry know it, but she was holding her breath and praying

that he could come up with one good reason. She didn't want to go to New York City and become a famous actress. She wouldn't know what to do with herself in New York City, away from everyone she knew and loved. And she wasn't that good an actress anyway, no matter if Mr. Tyrone Power had been taken with her. As soon as he found out what a poor actress she was, he'd send her packing and she wouldn't blame him. She'd only taken off the way she had because she'd been so furious at Henry for having the gall to come back, after months of absence, and assume that she'd marry him without a by-your-leave.

Henry racked his brains. "Well, if you married me, you and Phoebe could go on being friends. She'd never have to know that you were an actress and her half sister, but you wouldn't be traveling all over the state every summer having to write her lying letters about why you were traveling. Schenectady and Albany are so close to each other so you could see her whenever you wanted to."

That was a good reason, Contrition admitted, but only to herself. It would be wonderful to get to see Phoebe whenever she wanted to, all open and aboveboard as a respectable married woman. Henry and Justin were already friends; it would be the most natural thing in the world for the two young couples to see a lot of each other. She'd get to see Jewel, too, and that scamp David, and Zeus, it would be a dратted shame if she didn't get to take Zeus in hand once in awhile so Justin wouldn't ruin him. But it still wasn't reason enough.

She glared at Henry, not letting him see that she was giving an inch. "You have a lot of explaining to do," she said. "Like why you disappeared and why you stayed away so long and why you never let me know you loved me!"

They were still walking along the towpath while they talked, Contrition so adept that she could give almost all of her attention to Henry and still keep the line boat moving without running into disaster. Henry's rented horse kept pace with them along the road, an anxious eye on the idiot who'd deserted him, toying with the notion of turning around and going back home without him.

"I'll explain it all. I'll tell you everything." Henry said. Well, almost everything, he hedged, in his own mind. He had a very good idea that it wouldn't do to tell her about Angela, or the other

delightful ladies in the pleasure palace in Italy. It might have been totally necessary, in order for him to lull the brothers and cousins Mazzini into thinking that he was an empty-headed *roué* so that he and Leon could make their escape, but a girl like Contrition just might hold the opinion that he could have found some other way.

"It had better be a good reason!" Contrition said. Drat him, if she didn't love him so much, she'd trip him up and send him plunging into the canal!

"It was a good reason. I had to go to Italy and find my cousin Leon or I would have been hung for a murder I didn't commit. Is that a good enough reason?"

Contrition gasped. While her mouth was still open, while her astonishment had her off guard, Henry caught her in his arms and kissed her, very thoroughly and soundly.

"Here, what's all this!" An outraged bellow came from the captain of the line boat. "You can't go acting like that, kissing a boy right on the towpath, you miserable homosexual! Get the hell away from my boat and that boy!"

"He isn't a boy, she's a girl!" Henry shouted back, to the hilarious amusement of all within earshot. "Damnit, Contrition, get back on that boat and get into a dress! I'm not going to take you home and introduce you to my mother and father got up like a boy!"

"I haven't said that I'm going to marry you yet."

"You are going to marry me. It's all settled."

"Because you say so?" Her eyes flashing sparks, Contrition glared at him. "In other words, you're going to be a typical man and keep your wife right under your thumb!"

"Certainly I am. That's where wives belong." Henry didn't mean it, and he knew he wouldn't have had a chance of carrying it out even if he had meant it, but he couldn't resist saying it just to see Contrition's eyes flash.

"You've got another think coming. Maybe I'll marry you and maybe I won't. I'll have plenty of time to make up my mind. Can I get some of Amos's money right away?"

"Probates take time, but you can borrow against it. Any bank would lend you what you want, if you had a good reason for

wanting it." Henry was puzzled. What the devil was in that contorted mind of Contrition's now?

"Good. That's what I'll do, then. I'll borrow enough to set Lotta up as a dressmaker. We'll live together, two respectable dressmakers, till we decide whether or not we want to get married. I'm not much at dressmaking but I can baste and do straight seams while Lotta does the fancy things. Then, if she decides she wants to marry your cousin Leon, there won't be anything to stop her, she'll be so respectable! And if I decide I want to marry you, I'll do it, but both of us will keep right on being dressmakers when we want to, so's we'll be independent and not under our husbands' thumbs. I'm not having either of us be beholden to any husbands."

Henry groaned. Knowing Contrition, that's just what she would do, and he had no doubt that when she and Lotta set themselves up as dressmakers, every lady of consequence in Schenectady and some of them from Albany would flock to them. He'd seen what Lotta could do with a length of cloth and a spool of thread. His mother and his sisters would be their first clients, and all the other ladies would follow their lead. He and Leon would have to watch their steps if they wanted to hang onto their wives.

Well, if that was the way it was going to be, that was the way it was going to be. It promised that there'd never be a dull moment, in any case!

"All right. I agree. Now get on that boat and get into a dress before my horse gets away from me!"

"You'd better believe that she's going to get into a dress, if she's a girl, and get plumb away from my boat!" the line-boat captain was as mad as a wet hen, maybe madder. A girl, flumboggling him into thinking she was a boy, talking him into letting her take the towline, it wasn't decent! He'd be the laughingstock of the Erie Canal, he'd never live it down!

In a daze, hardly believing that she'd make Henry knuckle under so easily, Contrition complied. She paid no mind to the other lady passengers, who looked at her askance, pulling their skirts aside, as she passed them. If she had any gumption, she'd make Henry suffer a little more before she gave in.

Only if she made him suffer, she'd suffer too. She didn't ever

want to be separated from him again. She'd spent too much of her life separated from him, all of her life before she'd known him and entirely too much of it after she'd known him. He wasn't going to get away from her again, even if she had to give up making him suffer some more in order to keep her eye on him so he couldn't get away! She could at least give him some uneasy moments, when she and Lotta were all set up as dressmakers, by making him think that maybe she wouldn't marry him after all.

Watching as Contrition reappeared, dressed in a perfectly respectable dress and carrying her other possessions in her shawl, Henry couldn't help grinning, thinking of the impact this girl would have on his mother and father when he brought her home to them.

And then any thought of grinning was swept from his mind as he caught her into his arms, holding her close at last, his heart leaping with a joy he'd never dreamed possible even as his body threatened to burn to a cinder as she pressed herself against him, returning his kiss with a fervor that made him realize that even Angela had been an amateur, compared to his Contrition.

"Oh, God, how I love you!" he gasped out, shaking. And Contrition, shaking as hard as he was, said, "You'd better! If you don't, I'll make you sorry you were ever born!"

Henry had no way of guessing that she added, to herself, that she probably wouldn't have much time for dressmaking, once they were married. She'd be too busy raising their children. Let him worry a little, she thought, as she let him help her, very properly as a gentleman should always help a lady, into the buggy, while the lineboat passengers cheered, relishing the little drama that had unfolded before their eyes to make this last trip of the season memorable.

Contrition opened her mouth to say "Give me those ribbons!" as soon as she was settled, but the look Henry gave her made her change her mind. Instead, she moved closer to him and put her head on his shoulder. It felt as if it belonged there.

Grinning, Henry lifted the horse into a trot. Schenectady, here we come, ready nor not! he thought, as he pulled Contrition even closer. It had taken a long time, but it looked as if tomorrow had finally come.

SHE FOUND GLORY ON THE STAGE—AND PASSION IN A FUGITIVE'S ARMS

Escaping her cruel stepfather, beautiful raven-haired Contrition Reeves left the farm where she had toiled a lifetime, and embarked on a perilous mission to find her blood father—and bring him to ruin.

Pursued by ruthless bounty hunters, she found shelter with a troupe of actors—and succumbed to the lure of the stage. But it was in the arms of Henry Davenport, the dark, handsome society gentleman—wrongly accused of a heinous crime—that she yielded to passion.

From the exotic fever of the race track to the exclusive elegance of New York society, from the teeming banks of the Erie Canal, to the dangerous shores of Italy, they journeyed, fugitives from the law—bound by a love that would not set them free.

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